

## **ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRANTS, INTERNAL SECURITY AND NORTHEAST INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

International community has recognized that environmental concerns are directly or indirectly linked with internal security of nation states or regions within both competitive and cooperative frameworks of political economy and therefore the dimension of environment can be added as a third pillar to military and economic dimensions of security. Noted scholars like Homer Dixon and others tried to identify links between environmental scarcity and acute conflicts with the contention that environmental change leads to social change. The economy of India's North eastern states is inextricably linked to their ecology. In the Northeast India, environmental migrants' movements since the mid twentieth century confirm the linkage between immigrants and internal insecurity. This paper tries to establish the fact that environmental migrants have played an important role in contributing to the regional clustering of violence and the diffusion of low intensity conflicts by bringing in a change in the domestic balance of power in the Northeastern region of India.

Key Words: Environment, Security, Northeast India, Immigrants, Conflict

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## 1. Introduction

Environment has now emerged as a contested paradigm in political discourse. Global environmental efforts represent an alternative paradigm for ordering and addressing security concerns in an increasingly interdependent post cold war world. The causes, effects and solutions of the global environmental challenges ignore national boundaries calling into question many assumptions of the associated traditional realist definition of security. Authors have recognized environmental concerns within both competitive and cooperative frameworks and have made the case for adding the dimension of environment to military and economic dimensions of security as a third pillar. As one of the most potential non military threats to the domain of national security, environmental stress provides stimulus to domestic political strife and external political conflicts. Environmental stress has been isolated as a cause of acute conflict in all kinds of causal analysis and study models on conflicts.

Environment insecurity is often characterized by antecedent and intervening social and political conflict variables. Attempts to isolate environmental causes of insecurity can be misleading in conceptualizing the causal relationships behind internal security related issues. Noted scholars like Homer Dixon and his colleagues have attempted to identify links between environmental scarcity and acute conflicts without formulating a precise definition of environmental security. According to their single case studies, developing countries are supposed to be the most susceptible to environmental conflict. It is because environmental scarcity serves as a strong underlying cause of intra state conflict in the developing part of the world. This sub national, diffuse and persistent conflict takes the form of ethnic clashes due to environmentally induced population movements and civil strife.

Homer Dixon (1991) postulated an initial conception of “environmental change leading towards social change”. This social change more often figures prominently as a cause of international conflict. He cited ethnicity, class, religious structures and regime legitimacy as factors that could affect this causal relationship. It stems from environmental scarcity that affects economic productivity and therefore livelihoods, elite interests and state capacity to confront these challenges. These internal conflicts could lead to a fragmentation of the state or conversely to more authoritarian hardening of the state. Few cases have however supported interstate conflict

hypothesis in terms of renewable resources as the source of conflict. Defence intelligence analysts are trained to be aware of environmental stress as a potential threat to regime stability. Finally, the armed forces and intelligence agencies have participated in relief missions to allay human suffering that is symptomatic of environmental catastrophies(Constantine,1993)

### **Redefining Security**

At its fundamental level, the term security has meant the effort to protect a population and territory against organized force while advancing state interests through competitive behavior. This narrow focus on military threats and responses or high politics has meant that other factors such as international economic transactions and the environment, or low politics have been considered secondary issues for the security of states.

Richard Ullman (1983) contended that issues such as population growth in developing nations and the accompanying competition for control of resources and transboundary migration etc could result in severe conflict. Environmental degradation often undercuts economic potential and human well being which in turn helps fuel political tensions and conflict. Occurring within and among states with domestic turmoil, these dynamics often hold consequences that extend beyond territorial borders. Environmental strains that transcend national borders are already beginning to break down the sacred boundaries of national sovereignty' (Mathews 1989). A great deal of environmental security concerns focus on transnational issues such as stratospheric ozone depletion, green house warming and deforestation while also including the importance of resource scarcity and regional degradation.

## **2. Environmental Insecurity and India's North East**

The economy of India's North eastern states is inextricably linked to their ecology. These states are rich in forest resources and bio diversity, which can generate livelihood and income for the people, for instance, from the sale of medicines developed from the rich knowledge that local communities have of the medicinal plants of the region or from tourism. But according to civil society representatives from the states, national and global policies are not designed to ensure that the benefits from these biological and knowledge resources go to the people.

The last ten years of global negotiations on environmental and development like World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) have failed to address the issue of poverty as rich country governments refuse to address hard issues, such as fair terms of trade for poor countries. In India, the government has made very little effort to consult and inform the people of India to develop firm proposals for the WSSD. At the global level, governments resist firm targets and deadlines to stop or reverse impending environmental disasters or try to make changes that will generate more income for poor countries. Global environmental problems caused by the life styles of people in rich countries are worsening the situation for the poor of the world. For instance, emission of green house gases such as carbon dioxide mostly from rich countries are causing the earth to warm up and thus is changing the world's climate. This phenomenon could have disastrous impacts on the states of North East India.

These climate changes could worsen the flood situation in these states. In addition, climate change could reduce the fertility of the soil by affecting its moisture content and thus impact agriculture. It could worsen the shortage of fresh water with change in rainfall patterns and could also cause dramatic change in biological diversity. The combined effect of these changes on the ecology of the North east will have the worst effect on the poor people of the region, who are heavily dependent on their environment to meet their food, fuel, fodder and housing needs.

There can be listed several problems that are common to the North eastern states including the loss of biodiversity with the associated problems of habitat loss, human-animal conflicts and alienation of communities from their traditional habitats: the impacts of climate change in the region: fresh water shortage; the use of pesticides in agriculture, particularly in tea production and insurgency.

From an inclusive perspective, one can view a likely human competition with nature as the most relevant conception of ecological security in the North eastern region of India. Human actions are leading to the rapid extinction of species, proliferation and mutation of disease causing agents and degradation of ecosystems that in turn threaten human well being. Overcrowding and haphazard urbanization is pushing humans into heretofore relatively unpopulated areas where

they come in contact with micro organisms that can be liberated only by the network of global transportation.

### **3. Environmental Migrants, Conflict and Internal Security**

Environmental migrants, people who are forced to abandon lands which are no longer conducive to inhabitation due to environmental degradation, clash with the number traditionally classified as political refugees by national and international bodies (Jacobson, 1989). An empirical analysis of Environmental migrants' movements since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century confirms the linkage between immigrants and internal insecurity. Population movements are an important factor contributing to the regional clustering of violence and the diffusion of low intensity conflicts. It is particularly true when new migrant settlers, politically active communities in exile, contribute towards forced displacement of the native ethnic population. Sumit Ganguly refers to the displacement of the indigenous native population in states like Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland owing to the influx of migrants from Bangladesh. In Tripura, the native population has already been outnumbered, leading to ethnic conflicts that have ravaged the state over the last two decades. The large scale transfer of cultivable land to the settlers or refugees was followed by denotification of forest land. This led to economic exploitation and alienation generating a strong sense of tribal identity and militancy. In the two decades after independence, Tripura was transformed into a refugee state.

The strategy of manipulating refugee communities to serve geo political goals has also been documented in several developing countries (Stedman 2003). More commonly, refugee populations can provide resources and support base to domestic anti government opposition by ethnic groups or promote political factionalism. In some cases, immigrants are able to set up complex political structures in exile and can challenge the host government directly. Migrants' movements allow for an exchange of resources and ideas among rebel groups in neighboring countries; cases in point are the NE militant groups in Bangladesh. This suggests that refugee flows and population movements can spur the spread of conflict both between and within the states.

Second, refugee flows can change the ethnic balance in a country sparking discontent by local populations towards the immigrants as well as the government that allows access to the immigrants. As Michael Brown (1996) writes, it further complicates the picture by bringing in a change in the domestic balance of power. Changes in demographic patterns due to migration heighten nativist sentiments among local populations and are ply of labour would not be sufficient, apart from creating new problems like scarcity of food grains in the province, due to very scanty population at the time. The government, therefore, encouraged importation of estate labour from other parts of India which began in large scale in 1858-59 when 400 labourers were brought to Cachar district from Banaras, Ghazipur, Chotanagpur and Bihar. After 1860, the importation was much accelerated. The tea industry thus secured all its labour force from outside the state. Even in 1901, the total number of labourers in the tea garden was 654,000 which was about one-tenth of the total population of Assam (including the Sylhet district). One of the total number of foreigners registered in Assam in 1901, nearly 85 percent belonged to tea garden labour class. After 1931, this process of mass importation of tea garden labourers from other parts of India has considerably slowed down. But by this time the total number of already settled labourers both in the garden and outside was considerable. The 1951 census shows that about 12 percent of the total population of Assam is supported by the tea industry. A large proportion of the present population of Assam (especially in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Cachar districts) belong, therefore, to the immigrant tea garden labourers.

The virgin and fertile soil of Assam has attracted a large number of immigrants from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) during the last few decades. The Census Report of 1911 mentioned for the first time the movement of immigrants from the East Bengal to Assam's waste lands. The settlers from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur began to flow to the Char' lands (i.e. lands formed by the deposits of alluvium from rivers) in Goalpara district. In 1911 these immigrants formed a fifth of the total population of Goalpara district. After 1911, these new settlers spread beyond Goalpara district to other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. They came to Assam with their families and thus they also, like the tea garden labourers, began to increase the permanent population of Assam. This inflow of immigrants had been described by Mr. Mullan, the Census Commissioner, in 1931 Census Report as "likely to alter permanently

the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization”.

During the post-partition period of the country, there has been a large influx of Hindu refugees from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) who settled down in areas near urban centers or in rural areas where they have some relations or linguistic affinity. The 1951 census had given the number of refugees in Assam as 274,455. Of these 272,075 came from East Pakistan, only 647 from West Pakistan and 1,733 from areas not specified. Amongst the states of India, Assam has got the largest proportion of persons born outside the state. Out of Assam's total population of 9,044,000 in 1951, as many as 1,344,000 or 14 percent were born outside Assam. Assam (and also other states of N.E. India) experienced tremendous rate of population growth in the country. The latest figures indicate that from 32.90 lakhs of population in Assam in 1901, the population in Assam increased to 199.03 lakhs in 1981 or by about 505 percent within the 80 years period, from 1901 to 1981. During the period India as a whole experienced growth of population by 186.84 percent. The influx of the Muslim farm settlers from East Bengal became slow after the partition, but it again began in post 1951 (particularly after 1971 Bangladesh war) to the Government waste land, grazing land, forest land and 'Chars' (river island). There are also large numbers of immigrants from Nepal in Assam. Most of them depend on livestock farming. Besides grazing buffaloes on the riverine tracts, many Nepalese have settled down in the outskirts of the town, on hill slopes to sell milk and milk-products in the town. The 1951 census had given the number of speakers of the Nepali language as 125,320. Though the Nepalis have settled down in all the districts, high concentration is seen mainly in Darrang, Lakhimpur and Khasi Hill districts.

In addition to these influxes, a large number of people from other parts of India have also come to North East India after independence for trade, business, industry, profession, etc. Exact number of these Indian migrants cannot be properly estimated. From the natural rate of growth of population in all-India (and also Assam), it has been estimated that about 20 to 25 lakhs of persons have come to Assam since 1951 to 1971 from outside the state. Another 15 to 20 lakhs of people from outside the state is estimated to have come to Assam after 1971. It is difficult to state how many of these immigrants were foreigners and how many were Indian citizens. But the

majority of these migrants, at least 70 percent, were people both Hindus and Muslims from Bangladesh.

Because of the influx of huge number of foreigners to Assam and possible adverse impact of these influx in political, social and economic lives of the people of Assam, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) started large scale agitation against the foreigners in 1979 with active participation of indigenous people in the movement and with co-operation of other sections of the population. In the month of April, 1979 the foreigners issue got its momentum in Assam when there was the need of holding parliamentary bye-election of Mangaldoi constituency due to the death of Member of Parliament Mr. Hiralal Patowary. For the election voters' list was newly examined and in the process the names of many foreigners were found out from the voters' list and out of 70,000 suspected voters 45,000 voters were declared foreigners by the court only in Mangaldoi Parliamentary constituency. That manifested the situation of other constituencies in Assam. During this time Morarzi Desai Government resigned and the President N. Sanjiva Reddy ordered for new election, so the Election Commission was directed not to give up the name of voters from the voters' list as it was a time consuming process. Besides it was suggested to the Election Commission to examine the voters' list only after the completion of election. But AASU, who took the leading part in the anti foreigner movement, declared that holding of election cannot be allowed 'without the correction of voters' list'. The organization demanded the detection and deportation of foreigners before the election in the 14 Lok Sabha Constituencies in Assam. Under the President ship of Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Mr. Bhrigu Kumar Phukon, General Secretary, AASU organized a mass rally in Guwahati on 6<sup>th</sup> November, 1979 to demand solution of foreigners' issue immediately. The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS), Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchal Lok Parishad (PLP) offered complete co-operation to AASU in the foreigners' issue. As a result week long Satyagraha, demonstration, 'bandh' and picketing in the oil industries for twenty four hours were taken up. Due to the movement the transportation of Crude Oil from Digboi, Guwahati, Bongaigaon and Barauni was stopped. The sentiment of the Assamese people became so high that the popular government of Assam collapsed one after another, the political parties were bifurcated, the educational institutions were closed continuously for several months,

the Public Sector industries were closed and the election could not be held in twelve parliamentary constituencies out of fourteen.

After six years of agitation, the anti-foreigner movement culminated in the Assam Accord that was signed on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1985 between the movement leadership and the Union Government. The Union Home Secretary R. D. Pradhan, the President and General Secretary of AASU respectively signed the historic Assam Accord in presence of the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. Amongst other understandings, the Accord provided for (1) Disfranchisement of foreigners who settled down in Assam during 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1966 to 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 for a limited period of 10 years; (2) deportation of foreigners who came to Assam after 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 to other places; (3) regularization of pre 1966 foreign immigrants as citizens of India; and (4) holding of fresh election in Assam on the basis of revised voters' list and immediate imposition of President's rule in the State.

As the anti-foreigner movement got its momentum, the movement leaders and their supporter increasingly felt the need for a regional party capable of focusing on the aspiration and sentiment of the Assamese people. After a lot of deliberations and discussions with other like minded organizations i.e. PLP, AJD etc, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional political party, was formed just 67 days before Assam Legislative Assembly elections held in December, 1985. By securing 67 seats in the 126 member Assembly, the AGP grabbed power in Assam defeating the congress (1) which could secure only 25 seats. Thus, the thirty plus students leaders under the Chief Minister ship of Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta formed government in Assam. But the AGP Government has failed in every front in implementing the Assam Accord in its two full terms. So a social scientist of Assam remarked that "In the general election held in December, 1985, the Assamese people gave their verdict in favour of the AGP. In its election pledge, the AGP assured the people that it would implement the Assam Accord in letter and spirit. Further, the AGP leaders promised to establish "Sonar Asom" (Golden Assam). Most of the Assamese people sincerely believed that the AGP Government (which they called their 'Own Government') would fulfill their long cherished hopes and aspirations. But unfortunately, it seems that the hopes and aspirations of the Assamese people appeared to have been shattered by the manner in which the AGP Government functioned for two full terms.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

The inflow of a large number of foreign nationals belonging to different linguistic groups has created serious socio-political and economic problem for the indigenous population of the state. Apart from the adverse effects on agricultural land and employment of local people, such inflow endangers the status of the language of the indigenous people and also affects the composition of the local Government through collective group voting pattern in the election. In fact, the growing numbers of migrants in Assam are viewed by a large section of the Assamese people as a threat to their socio-cultural, political and economic life. Linguistically, Assam is now the most diversified state in India. It may be noted that 57 percent of its population speaks Assamese, and 16 percent speaks one of the local tribal language. Bengali, the language of Bangladesh and West Bengal, is the mother-tongue of 17.4 percent of the population. Hindi the language of migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan is spoken by 4.3 percent of the population. Economically, the Assamese elites feel a sense of insecurity from the point of view of what they call economic exploitation by the outsiders. It may be noted that the modern sinews of life such as employment, trade business etc. are largely in the hands of the non-Assamese residents of Assam. Whatever employment opportunities are available, the educated Assamese middle class have to face keen competition from the non-Assamese. The non-Assamese middle class not only have much greater earnings, but their styles of living stands in sharp contrast to that of the Assamese counterpart which in turn only helps to increase bitterness. The aspiring Assamese middle class therefore, considers some of the immigrants communities as a 'substantial threat' to their economic advancement. They feel that if immigration from Bangladesh, Nepal and other parts of India remains unchecked and economic backwardness of the state is not removed, the Assamese people would soon lose their distinct identity. The movement on the issue of Foreign Nationals has been the manifestation of this anxiety.

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