

## **ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION ISSUE AND ITS SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN ASSAM**

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### **Abstract**

Illegal immigration has been the most volatile and contentious issue in Assam vis-à-vis North-East India in recent years with its far-reaching consequences. The roots of the present illegal immigration problem in Assam can be traced back to the British colonial rule in Assam. The trend of flow of population which continued even after the independence of India, assumed an alarming proportions after the creation of Bangladesh. Although the presence of infiltrators is not restricted to Assam or other NE states like Tripura, Meghalaya etc and even spread over other Indian states, the situation is more serious and complicated in Assam where due to historical reasons, large scale infiltration created an apprehension among the local people of being minoritised and hence, over the years a very critical situation developed in Assam with its adverse impact on the society and politics of Assam. In this backdrop, the paper seeks to discuss the factors responsible for illegal immigration to Assam and also analyse its implications on the society and politics of Assam. For the purpose of study, required data and information would be collected from secondary sources.

### **Keywords:**

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## 1. Introduction

Illegal immigration has been the most volatile and contentious issue in Assam vis-à-vis India in present times with its far-reaching consequences. It is well-known that migration or movement from one place to another is not a new phenomenon. If we look at the history of the world, we would find one thing in common in all ages and periods, and that is the migration of people from one place to another for various reasons. And there are several instances which highlight the positive and constructive role being played by the migrant people towards enriching the culture and history of the receiving region; although migration often has also been a source of conflict between the migrants and the local communities. However, in recent years, illegal immigration has been an issue of much concern for a large number of countries of the world.

In this context, it deserves mention that India since time immemorial has been a preferred place for immigration and attracted several streams of immigrants from different races and culture and assimilated them to build a composite civilisation (Das 2016, 9). Infact, such immigration of people was never considered to be a potent source of threat for India. However, after India achieved independence following her partition in 1947, illegal immigration from Pakistan and later from Bangladesh has been a cause of deep concern for the Government of India and some state governments from time to time. States like West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya are situated in the most infiltration prone zone, although the presence of infiltrators are not limited to these states alone, but rather dispersed in other states of the country as well. However, situation has been more serious in the north-eastern state of Assam where due to historical reasons, large scale influx of people intensified the simmering tensions among the local population of being minoritised and overwhelmed in the face of huge influx of people. Hence, a very chaotic and turbulent situation developed in Assam over the years, which has its profound impact on the society and politics of Assam. It may be noted that, there are a number of studies which deal with the illegal immigration issue. Some of these include- Wiener (1983), Mahanta (1986), De (2005), Hazarika (2006), Guha (2006), Mishra (2006), and so on. Although all these studies have made significant contribution but lack comprehensiveness as they focus on one or the other issues related to the main area. In this respect, the present study is relevant as it attempts to make a comprehensive study by dealing with the issue in its historical perspective and then gradually dwell upon the present situation.

## 2. Historical Background

The history of the illegal immigration problem in Assam dates back to the British annexation of Assam in 1826. The first group of people encouraged by the British to migrate to Assam was the Hindu Bengali people and they came to Assam for managing various clerical tasks. It is to be noted that the migration of various streams of people to Assam in the pre-independence period cannot be considered immigration in the true sense of the term because it was just a movement of the people from one part of the country to the other. Apart from the Bengali Hindus, other groups of people to migrate to Assam in the early part of the British rule were the tea garden labourers, some Marwari traders and moneylenders, Nepali graziers etc. A significant stream of migrants to Assam in the pre-independence period had been the migration of vast hordes land hungry peasants mainly Muslims from the overpopulated Mymensingh district of erstwhile East Bengal to Assam. In 1931, C. S Mullan the Census Superintendent commented on the migration process to Assam from the Mymensingh district of East Bengal in the following words,

“Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty five years ...which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy...the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization – has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali immigrants; mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal sometime before 1911...But, as we now know, the Bengali immigrants censused for the first time on the *char* islands of Goalpara in 1921 were merely the advance guard- or rather the scouts – of a huge army following closely at their heels. By 1921 the first army corps had passed into Assam and had practically conquered the district of Goalpara... Where there is waste land thither flock the Mymensinghians. In fact, the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal into the Assam Valley during the last twenty-five years...the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of large body of ants...it is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home.”(Sharma 2009, 26-27)

Such a huge migration of people had its tremendous affect on the demographic scenario. Alarmed by the high increase in immigrant population, and most importantly due to growing resentment among the local population, the British government introduced 'Line System' in 1920 whereby certain areas were demarcated for the settlement of the immigrants. But this measure utterly failed to control flow of population due to corruption of government officials and at the hands of various vested interests. Besides, during Muslim League regime in late 1930s under Md. Sadullah, in the name of 'Grow More Food Scheme', official encouragement was provided to Muslim peasants from East Bengal districts to migrate to Assam. In the face of huge migration of people to Assam in the pre-independence period, feeling of resentment developed among the local people which often led to occasional protests and conflicts between the immigrants and the local people. But these never assumed a very serious dimension.

In the post-independence period also, owing to large scale communal violence and riots in East Pakistan and religious persecution of minorities, etc large number of terror stricken uprooted Hindu Bengalees took shelter in India. On the other hand, there also has been large scale influx of Muslim infiltrators to Assam and the process of infiltration continued even after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. As a result, the 'Anti-Foreigners Agitation' or the 'Assam Movement' was launched under the leadership of AASU and AAGSP and in course of time, it became a mass movement. The movement which lasted for almost six years (1979-1985) ended with the signing of the historic Assam Accord (1985) which among various points, laid down March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date and year for the identification and deportation of illegal immigrants.

### **3. Factors Responsible for Illegal Immigration**

3.1 Porous borders: Highly porous India-Bangladesh border is a major factor behind illegal immigration to Assam. Out of total 4096 km long Indo-Bangladesh border, Assam shares 262 km border of which 92 km is riverine. The terrain along the border is a mix of hilly and jungle tracks, plains and rivers. This diverse mix of topographical features makes the borders extremely porous (Das 2016, 35). In large portion of the border there is no fencing or any other border guarding mechanism either due to difficult terrain or indifferent attitude of the government authorities from time to time. This makes the borders highly porous and taking advantage of the

porous borders and other loopholes in border management, large scale infiltration takes place from across the border to Assam.

3.2 Religious persecution of minorities: Large scale communal riots and other communal disturbances in erstwhile East Pakistan in the years following Partition and creation of a separate islamic republic Pakistan, compelled a large number of people mainly Hindus to flee their country and take shelter in India. And over the years the Census figures of Bangladesh recorded sharp decline in the percentage of Hindu population. Apart from Hindus, Chakmas who were mainly Buddhists and other communities took shelter in India. The situation did not improve either even after the creation of Bangladesh based on the ideals of democracy. The declaration of Islam as the state religion and enactment of various discriminatory property Acts etc added to the plight of the religious minorities. Hence, the flow of population continued and these people took shelter mainly in the states of Assam, Tripura, West Bengal and to some extent in other states also.

3.3 Economic and associated factors: Due to excessive population growth rate, there has been an increasing pressure on land. Resultantly, there is huge problems of poverty and unemployment which often push the population of Bangladesh to look beyond domestic economic avenues for alternative sources of earning income in neighbouring areas. Hence economic compulsions are a major source of illegal immigration in Assam. Besides, environmental hazards like recurrent floods, soil erosion, cyclones and droughts etc have also been a cause of illegal Bangladeshi immigration to Assam.

3.4 Political factors: Political patronage is one of the significant contributing factors behind the present illegal immigration problem in Assam. Due to vote bank politics, the political parties mainly Congress and later the other political parties encouraged and supported illegal immigration to Assam. No party dared to lose this precious vote bank and hence preferred to remain silent spectators to the continuous influx of infiltrators and even facilitated their permanent stay in Assam by providing various fake documents.

#### **4. Illegal Immigration in Assam and its Socio-Political Implications**

Illegal immigration has its serious implications for the overall socio-economic, demographic, political and security scenario of Assam vis-à-vis North East India. Hence the issue of illegal immigration has become a major concern for policy makers in recent years.

##### **4.1 Social Impact**

Illegal immigration is a serious problem for Assam, which over the years has tremendously affected the traditional fabric of Assamese society. The social impact of illegal immigration is mainly felt in the areas of culture, language and life styles. It is well known that, due to historical reasons there developed an apprehension in the minds of the indigenous people of being minoritised and outnumbered in their own land and their language and culture being subverted once the immigrants come to a dominant position. This simmering tension persisted over time and indeed assumed greater dimension in the face of unabated influx from Bangladesh. It often manifested itself through various conflicts and violence among the immigrants and the indigenous communities. One of the products of this apprehension is the Language Bill of 1960, whereby Assamese was declared as the official language of Assam. This again created apprehensions in the minds of many other ethnic groups and consequently distanced them from the Assamese society. Another impact of illegal immigration is felt in the sphere of religion. Assam, which is basically a Hindu majority state, fears that it would become Muslim dominated due to continuous influx from Bangladesh. Moreover, in recent years, most of the ethnic movements in Assam be it Bodo Movement or the like, in one way or the other are consequences of illegal immigration problem.

In November 1998, in a report submitted to the President of India the then Governor of Assam Lt. General (Retd.) S.K Sinha expressed in categorical terms, the danger faced by Assam due to the unabated influx of immigrants to Assam. “As a result of population movement from Bangladesh, the spectre looms large of the indigenous people of Assam being reduced to a minority in their home state. Their cultural survival will be in jeopardy...This silent invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of the geostrategically vital districts of Lower Assam (on the border with Bangladesh). The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made...Loss of Lower Assam (the area close to the

Bangladesh border) will sever the entire landmass of the North-East from the rest of India and the rich natural resources of the region will be lost to the Nation.”(Kumar 2006, 5)

Most recently, the ‘Committee for Protection of Land Rights of Indigenous People of Assam’ constituted in Assam in February 2017, under the chairmanship of Mr. H.S Brahma submitted its interim report which also expressed in strong terms some of the dangerous facts about the huge influx from Bangladesh and underlined the grave situation confronting the indigenous communities of Assam. The report revealed that out of the total 33 districts of Assam, 15 districts have already become minority dominated districts due to unrestricted illegal immigration from Bangladesh (Khakhlary 2017, 1329). Further, in the report there was warning that if immediate measures are not adopted to prevent such large scale influx from Bangladesh by sealing the porous borders and also simultaneous detection and deportation of infiltrators through a Repatriation Treaty signed between India and Bangladesh, the situation is most likely to get aggravated in near future.

#### 4.2 Political Impact

Illegal immigration has been a burning issue in the politics of Assam. The issue has often been politicised by various political parties on the eve of almost every elections in the state and these parties utilize the situation to gain political benefit. In the years after independence, the political parties mainly the Congress utilized the illegal immigrants for their political benefit. Subsequently, other political parties also followed the same path. They encouraged further immigration and even facilitated their permanent stay in this country by arranging for various fake documents such as ration cards, citizenship certificates etc. It is a fact that, the political parties be it Congress or AGP did not dare to take any stern action in the illegal immigration issue out of fear of losing their precious vote banks. However, due to public pressure even if some measures were initiated, these were short-lived. Thus, over the years a critical situation developed in Assam where in many constituencies these immigrants are in a dominant position or atleast in a position to influence election outcomes. In 1979, on the eve of by-election in Mangaldoi constituency after the death of sitting MLA Hiralal Patowari, when the review of electoral rolls were in progress, it was observed that there was an abnormal increase in the numbers of voters. There stated hue and cry among the people and resultantly, the ‘Assam

Movement’ or the ‘Anti-Foreigners Agitation’ started under the leadership of AASU and AAGSP with the demand of ‘detection, deletion and deportation’ of foreigners. There was huge political turmoil in Assam and the political atmosphere was surcharged with the apprehension of domination of the indigenous people by the bangladeshi infiltrators. The movement which continued for six years ended with the signing of the historic Assam Accord in 1985. But it is a stern reality that even after 32 years of signing of the Assam Accord, the illegal immigration problem in Assam remains unresolved. It appears that there has been utter lack of political will towards solution of this issue. Besides, in 1983, the Congress government led by the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act. This Act was highly discriminatory and controversial as it was more favourable to the illegal immigrants. Thus the Act was largely a failure in detection and deportation of illegal immigrants from Assam. In 2005, the Supreme Court in its judgement in the Sarbananda Sonowal vs. Union of India case ruled that the IMDT Act is the biggest hurdle in the process of identification and deportation of illegal immigrants; and the Supreme Court ultimately struck down the Act declaring it unconstitutional. However, even today illegal immigration continues to be a highly debated and controversial issue in the politics of the state.

## **5. Conclusion**

Summing up, illegal immigration from Bangladesh is a serious problem in Assam which has cast its shadow heavily on the society and politics of the state. It no longer remains a regional issue which can be pushed under the carpet. Things have come to almost a saturation point and therefore, it is high time to adopt positive and effective measures towards the solution of this critical and complicated problem. In order to tackle the problem, a two-pronged strategy must be adopted- first, to immediately seal the porous India-Bangladesh border so as to stop fresh infiltration from Bangladesh. Barbed fencing along the border with Bangladesh should be completed in no time. Other security mechanisms in the border areas should be strengthened. Taking into consideration the fact that a large portion of India –Bangladesh border is riverine, river patrolling should be strengthened. Secondly, there should be serious attempt aiming at detection and deportation of illegal immigrants who are already residing in the state. It is a fact that at present there is no accurate statistics as to the total number of illegal immigrants staying in the state. However, as the NRC updation process in Assam is going on, it is hoped that with



the publication of final NRC, it would be possible to get a clear picture of the number of infiltrators present in Assam. Moreover, since under the present situation, deportation of detected illegal immigrants is a problem in the absence of a repatriation agreement between India and Bangladesh; Government of India should adopt a pro-active role by initiating action in this regard. But above all, there is the need of a positive and strong political will for the solution of the illegal immigration problem. Otherwise, any attempt towards solution of this problem would not be successful.

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