

IMMIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY OF ASSAM

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The debate over immigration to Assam has always been able to occupy a place of important in any form of media – both print and electronic. All such debates are concentrated mostly to the social culture and political aspects with little importance on the socioeconomic impact on the economy of the state. The area of the state covers 78,438 sq.km with a population of 2,66,55,528 and annual growth rate of 1.7% in 2001.

A salient feature of the demographic trend of the state is the explosive growth of population over the years. The density of population is considerably higher than the national average with 340 per sq.km since the beginning of the century. The high rate of population growth is solely explained by the influx of population from outside the state. This immigration problem is not a new phenomenon but was started way back during the British rule and it has been going on unabated till date.

With the appropriation of Assam into the colonial fold, the social structure was exposed and the state was no longer the social structure was exposed and the state was no longer the homeland of the Assamese people. Large scale state sponsored migration from different parts of the country as well as immigration from different parts of the country as well as immigration from neighboring countries like Nepal started since then. Millions of Bengali Muslim peasants from east Bengal migrated to Assam under the patronage of the British. It has changed the demographic profile of the state to such an extent that the land has become a fertile ground for ethnic conflict and unrest. As already started the immigration process was originally linked with the British interest and not for Assam's economy growth. It is observed that migration was very much significant in four major spheres and it resulted in the completion for resource and delineation of entrepreneurial activities.

The four spheres where large scale migration was significant were –

1. Tribal migration in tea plantation
2. Muslim Bengali migration in agriculture
3. Hindu Bengali migration in the service sector and
4. Marwari migration in business and industry

When the British made the attempt to lay the foundation of tea industry in 1835, a huge work force was required. As local labourers were scarce, so labourers made from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Chhotanagpur areas were engaged. Initially they were reluctant to work in Assam due to climatic condition and tough work. But they were forced to migrate with false promise of better future. Gradually these labourers made this land their home assimilated themselves with the locals and know they are know as the tea tribes.

The long continuous immigration of peasants and farm labourers from East Bengal, then East Pakistan and present Bangladesh is the result of the several push and pull forces. In the early stage of the process, the low density of population in Assam, abundance of virgin fertile land, open uncultivated chars(sand bars) and lack of proper land tenure system acted as powerful pull forces. While the poor living condition, mounting pressure on land, high population growth and harsh Zamindari system were some important push

factors. The tagging of Assam to East Bengal in 1905 and the development of rail communication in the state increased spatial mobility and further speeded up the process of migration.

Partition, instead of stopping further movement added new dimensions to the problem converting the case of internal migration to the character and complicity of international immigration. Whatever might have been the immediate impact of their arrival on the socio-cultural environment of the state, the East Bengal migration brought about an enormous change in the ethnic composition of the population as well as in the economy of Assam. The land of abundant valley became land scarce. The labour shortage economy turned into labour surplus. The relatively ethnic homogeneity of the society was replaced by ethnic heterogeneity.

Migration of Hindu Bengalis who are historically more advanced began as collaborators of the British administration. Their presence also became a cause of tension in later years. The Marwaris, the dominant trading class of North India, entered Assam for trade and business. Besides these four dominant categories of migration, Nepalis from Nepal also migrated in connection with the service in the British Army and also for pastoral activities.

Impact on the Economy

Despite having huge resources in the form of tea, Textile, Oil and Natural Gas, Fertilizers Chemicals, Jute, Rice, Mustard and Rapeseed etc. the state fails to generate sufficient wealth. Assam produces half of India's tea. It produces sufficient amount of oil and natural gas, chemicals, fertilizers and textile, jute and other cash crops. Still it is one of the poorest states in the country having 2.6% of India's population with 1.5% share of the national income. The economy of the state has an average growth of just 5.6% per year.

There are many reasons for this. These include immigration insurgency, lack of infrastructure, poor communication facilities, lack of proper connectivity with the rest of India, overdependence to agriculture, vulnerability to floods, high humidity and water logging which affects the quality of output.

Assam has for ever a century supplied the country with all oil and tea to ensure that India did not have to import all its requirements for saving precious for foreign exchange. The result was, a large chunk of economy was siphoned off out of the state. but there was little investment made in the state and as a result, the indigenous peoples saw very little development. As if this exploitation was not enough, the people gradually became aware of the fact and that they were in great danger of being minority in their own state. Continued and unabated migration from Bangladesh was fast changing the demographic composition of Assam. While initially this migration brought in labourers for cultivating the vast tracts of uncultivated lands, in the years it implied an economic squeeze on the local people as there were no unoccupied lands or jobs any longer.

Another major area of the economy of the state in which the exploding population growth took its toll on the natural resources is the forest Sector. Once a heavily forested state, Assam has lost its forest cover with rapid shrinkage in the forest area due of encroachment and destruction of forest resources. the area under forest cover has come down to 24.58% to the total geographical area (state forest report Assam, 2003).

Apart from illegal influx from Bangladesh, Nepal has remained at another major source of migration to Assam. It is a country with acute economic underdevelopment and industrial backwardness. most of the people live in rural areas where even the basic amenities of life are not available all the time. as a consequence, the arrival of Nepalese has not brought any positive change in the economy of Assam either in the form of capital

formation or accretion of higher skills. Such migration has not been able to contribute to the creation of any environment needed for industrialization and modernization. These people are mostly engaged in the cattle and rearing and unorganized dairying. Most of them have retained their roots in the country of their origin and as a result, a chunk of their savings flows out of the state. What is disheartening is that the price of milk in Assam is one of the highest in the country.

Even the Marwaris who completely control trade and business and thereby maintain a strong hold over the economy of the state has done little for economic development of Assam. No doubt they have been several institutions and liberally founded in political parties. But still they have not completely assimilated with the largest Assamese society. In fact they have made it a habit to invest much of their wealth in the state of their origin or other places but not Assam.

The problem of immigration has acquired a very complex character. It has become a potent factor of social, cultural, economic and political changes in Assam. Migration has resulted in shrinking of employment opportunities, deforestation, loss of scarce natural resources, outflow of capital and overall economic stagnation. The adverse impact of immigration is clearly visible in the economy of Assam. There is an urgent need to check immigration to Assam and proper policy initiatives are necessary for this purpose.

Some suggestions can be put forward to deal with the issue of immigration. These may include –

- a) A system of identity card is a must, particularly for those in the border areas.
- b) A practical system of visa and passport to check the unofficial border crossing is necessary.
- c) Work permits by the Government would allow the migrants to legally enter the state and maintain a check on the negative side.
- d) Up-dating of the National Register of Citizenship can help in identifying genuine Indian citizens and illegal migrants.
- e) Proper registration of birth and death is a must.
- f) Compulsory registration of all riverside crafts operating in the rivers of Assam.
- g) More number of border guards and police stations along with floating police stations to be manned by River Police Organization.
- h) Verification should be made compulsory against licenses issued to rickshaw pullers, pushcarts and other modes of transport. Moreover, the authorities need to be vigilant because without administrative zeal and dedication, the deportation of illegal migrants can never be possible.
- i) Demarcation of the border areas with proper fencing.

Over and above consciousness among the people is a must and they should wake up from their slumber of laziness and lack of work culture. It is needless to say that the people must be alert and vigilant and should form a common platform to fight this vexed problem faced by Assam.

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