

# Migration and growth of population in Assam: nature, and consequences

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## **Abstract**

*Two principal movements currently dominate the socio political landscape in Assam. One is the demand for autonomy and statehood by tribal groups headed by the Bodos and push against illegal migrants from Bagaldesh by native people of Assam. Migration is the third component of population change after mortality and fertility. Assam is situated in the north-east of India- bordering seven states and two countries viz. Bangladesh and Bhutan. The flows of immigrants started during the rule of British and continued till today due to the pull and push factor. The large volume of influx of migrants both interstate and international migration have modified the population structure of Assam in respect of ethno-religious composition, occupation structure etc. It adversely affects the social, economic and political environment of Assam, creating law and order problems where immigrants are present in large number. Migration is not a new phenomenon for Assam, but what is new is its massive nature since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The extent of migration and its impact on population growth and socio-economic condition in Assam has been a matter of controversy especially in the last two three decades. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the nature of migration of Assam and its impact on population growth of Assam with the help of secondary data.*

**Key word:** Migration, Population growth, fertility, demography, mortality

## **I. Introduction:**

Migration is one of the most important factors of population change after mortality and fertility. The United Nations Multilingual Demographic Dictionary defined migration as “a form of geographical mobility or spatial mobility between one geographical unit and another, generally involving a change in residence from the place of origin or place of departure to the place of destination or place of arrival. Such migration is called permanent migration and should be distinguished from other forms of movement which do not involve a permanent change of residence.” Assam is situated in the north-east of India- bordering seven states and two countries viz. Bangladesh and Bhutan. Two principal movements currently dominate the socio political landscape in Assam. One is the demand for autonomy and statehood by tribal groups headed by the Bodos and push against illegal migrants from Bagaldesh by native people of Assam. The flows of immigrants started during the rule of British and continued till today due to the pull and push factor. The large volume of influx of migrants both interstate and international migration have modified the population structure of Assam in respect

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of ethno-religious composition, occupation structure etc. It adversely affects the social, economic and political environment of Assam, creating law and order problems where immigrants are present in large number. Migration is not a new phenomenon for Assam, but what is new is its massive nature since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The extent of migration and its impact on population growth and its consequences in socio-economic condition in Assam has been a matter of controversy especially in the last two three decades.

Objective:

1. To study the nature of migration of Assam
2. To study the impact of migration on population growth of Assam
3. To study the consequences of migration of Assam

## **II. Methodology:**

The present study is descriptive and analytical one and used secondary data to meet its objectives. Secondary data are collected from various government websites, books.

Nature of Migration of Assam:

Assam is experiencing the influx of population from time to time and different directions. Thus migration is not a new phenomenon for Assam, but what is new is its massive nature since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Several streams of migrants originating from different parts of the sub continent started entering into Assam since the growth of British commercial interests in the mid nineteenth century. Since then five such prominent streams of migrants have been identified. First, labourers to work in the tea gardens of Assam coming from Bihar, Orissa, Chotnagpur, Madrass etc. .Second, Muslim peasants from then East Bengal. Third, Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan. Fourth, Migration from Nepal. Fifth, other migrants from different parts of India.

1.Tea garden labourers: The discoveries of tea in 1821 prompted Governor General Lord William Bentinck to start tea industry in Assam in 1830. The industry soon grew up covering Lakhimpur, Darrang, kamrup and Cachar District but at the cost of increase in the number of migrants coming from various parts of India mostly as labourers. A tea planters association was form in 1886 for the purpose, inter alias, of organizing a system of labour importation from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Chotnagpur, central provinces (Madhya Pradesh),united provinces (Utter Pradesh) madras(Tamil nadu), Bombay to Assam Vally. Most of the labourers were brought along with other members of their family because single labourers tended to run away from the estates, more often than those with families. Moreover, the children and women of the labourers also worked in the gardens.

2.The Muslim peasants from East Bengal:

(a)Pre independence period: The seconds streams of migration started in early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the muslim peasants from the then East Bengal districts of Mymansingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur. As per statistics the number of Muslim population born in Eastern Bengal and enumerated in Assam reached the enormous total of 5.38 lakh in 1951. This influx was accounted to availability of cheap and plentiful supply of virgin lands and the easy ryotwari settlement procedure in the Brahmaputra valley. The inflow of Muslim

cultivators were mainly from the thickly populated Mymensingh and Rangpur district of East Bengal to Sylhet and Goalpara districts of earlier Assam till 1891. The major influx of Bengali Muslims begun after 1900 as was revealed from the growth rate of population in the( Goalpara district which increased from 1.4 per cent in 1881-1891, 2 per cent in 1891-1900 to 30 per cent in 1901-1911. The following decade as reported in the census, the East Bengal settlers had moved to the Nowgong district and formed 14 per cent of their total population and also started to occupy the waste lands in Kamrup district. The same trend continued through 1930-1940 and a second wave occurred in 1942 when the migrants fled to Assam to get respite from the Bengal famine. The migration persisted even after East Bengal (including Mymensingh) became part of Pakistan in 1947 and international borders were interposed between Assam and East Bengal.

(b)Post-Independence Period :After independence, in spite of the Pakistan Passport System, Pakistan (control) Act and Migrants Act 1950, the flow of immigration continued. The partition of the country compelled a large number of Hindus to migrate to West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and various neighbouring states and they were rehabilitated under legal process. But another group of migrants (both Hindu and Muslim) entered Assam illegally. The exodus of Muslim farm labourers from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were not only encouraged by the village landlord or Muslim 'Muttabor' residing in India to get the supply of cheap agricultural labourers and ease the pressure of population on land in East Pakistan but also by the political motive of establishing pockets of influence in the state. During the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) both Hindu and Muslim refugees came to Assam from erstwhile Pakistan and they were supposed to return back to Bangladesh after its independence. Some of the refugees returned to Bangladesh, but a much larger portion remained in Assam. Infiltration continued as before and the new flow was not of refugees, but as earlier, of migrants seeking land and employment. The economy of Bangladesh, from which a higher percentage of migrants came to Assam, has exhibited a high degree of stagnation. It is a country with a large population, great poverty and very limited natural resources. According to the 1991 census, the density of population was 740 per sq. km. Bangladesh is not only one of the poorest countries of the world in terms of per capita income (PCI), but she suffers from substantial inequality in income distribution. The economy is an agrarian economy with total cultivated area of barely 22.5 million acres. Only about one-third of the cultivated area is entirely free of floods. Of the rest, 40 per cent is moderately flooded to less than 3 feet and the remainder to a depth of 6 feet or more. These factors create 'push-effect' to migration. The approximate number of Muslim immigrants from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh living in Assam during 1951-2001 would be 32.50 lakh (1951-71=18.65 lakh, 1971-91=6.45 lakh and 1991-2001=7.40 lakh).

### 3.The Bengali Hindu Migrants from East Pakistan:

The third stream of migrants is the Bengali Hindus who were brought by the Britishers for their office and other professional works. It happens because of their early initiation to English education and the British-India administrative system. The movement of this stream was intensified along with the opening of new railway lines, post and telegraph offices, development of tea and petroleum industries in particular. The Bengali clerks, doctors and lawyers monopolized the British Government jobs and professions. However, the most conspicuous mass migration of this stream took place at the time of partition and immediately thereafter. The migrants belonging to this category are mostly engaged in service and commercial activities and they are

concentrated in urban areas, especially in the Brahmaputra and Barak valley towns. For example, according to 1961 census Report, out of 9.13 lakhs urban population in Assam, 3.5 lakhs were Bengali as Against 3.04 lakhs Assamese speaking population.

#### 4. Migrants from Nepal

Another major stream of immigrants to Assam was from Nepal. To get better means of livelihood and to escape compulsory service in their native country, a considerable number of Nepalese entered Assam from the beginning of the 19th century. The total Nepali population in Assam was only 21,347 in 1901 constituting nearly 0.65 percent of the total population of Assam, which increased to 83,306 in 1931. During the post independence period there was sudden increase in the immigration of Nepalese into Assam. The immigration of Nepalese migrants still continues as the citizens of Nepal do not require any passport to enter India, under the terms of the Indo-nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and flow of both country nationals as well as their right to own property in either country is allowed, unhindered and without restrictions. These agreements only made official a situation, which had existed de facto from the British period.

The Nepali migrants came through Darjeeling district in West Bengal, largely through Gorakhpur and Deoria districts of Uttar Pradesh, and also through the Nepal bordering districts of Bihar. They occupied the wastelands of the valley, mostly in Darrang, Kamrup and Lakhimpur districts. From 1901- 1910 onwards the actual influx from Nepal started and their number increased at a rapid rate.

#### 5. Migrants from other states of India

The migration of the people from other states of India is mostly a post- independence phenomenon. The traders and artisans from Rajasthan, Punjab, Bihar and West Bengal constitute another stream of immigrants to Assam. Except tea, nearly the whole of import and export trade of Assam was in the hands of traders coming from Rajasthan, who not only managed the wholesale but, to a large extent, also the retail trade. Except a few from Kamrup district, the indigenous Assamese hardly engaged themselves in any kind of trading. The Punjabis were primarily contractors, skilled mechanics and carpenters. The migrants from Rajasthan (Marwaris) played an important role in opening up Assam to trade. They acted as money changers, bankers and general agents to the managers of the tea-gardens, especially in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts, operated most of trade throughout the state.

### **III. Illegal migration and Population growth in Assam:**

Migration plays an important role in population growth in Assam. Several streams of migrants originating from different parts of the sub continent started entering into Assam since the growth of British commercial interests in the mid nineteenth century. Two major waves of migration came after British rule. First after partition, from East Pakistan(now Bangladesh) then in the aftermath of the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. This is because of a history of migration a separated National Register of Citizens is demanded. This eventually led to an agitation during 1979-85, led by all Assam Students Union. It culminated in the 1985 Assam Accord, under which illegal migrants were to be identified and deported. The following indicators of the dimension of illegal migration taking place are relevant:-

- Bangladesh census records indicate a reduction of 39 lakhs Hindus between 1971 and 1981 and another 36 lakhs between 1981 and 1989. These 75 lakhs (39+36) Hindus have obviously come into India. Perhaps most of them have come into States other than Assam.

- There were 7.5 lakh Bihari Muslims in refugee camps in Bangladesh in 1971. At the instance of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan was persuaded to accept 33,000 Bihari Muslims. There are at present only 2 lakh Bihari Muslims in refugee camps in Bangladesh. The unaccounted for 5.17 lakhs must have infiltrated into India, as there is little possibility or evidence of their having merged into Bangladesh society.

- In 1970 the total population of East Pakistan was 7.5 crores but in 1974 it had come down to 7.14 crores. On the basis of 3.1% annual population growth rate of that period, the population in 1974 should have been 7.7 crores. The shortfall of 6 million people can be explained only by large scale migration.

Assam specific figures of illegal migrants have been worked out from available statistics as follows:-

- Recent enumeration of electors list in Assam by the Election Commission shows more than 30% increase in 17 Assembly constituencies and more than 20% increase in 40 constituencies between 1994 and 1997. Whereas the All India average growth for a three year period intervening the two intensive revisions in 1994 and 1997, is 7%, the growth in Assam for this period is 16.4%.

- Relative decadal percentage growth of population of Assam, All India and Bangladesh is as

Table:1.1: Decadal population growth and density of population

| Year | Population in crore |       | Decadal growth(percent) |       |            | Density of Population (per sq.km.) |       |
|------|---------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|------------|------------------------------------|-------|
|      | INDIA               | ASSAM | INDIA                   | ASSAM | BANGLADESH | INDIA                              | ASSAM |
| 1901 | 23.83               | .329  | ---                     | ---   |            | 77                                 | 42    |
| 1911 | 25.21               | .384  | 05.75                   | 16.99 | 9.1        | 82                                 | 49    |
| 1921 | 25.13               | .463  | -0.31                   | 20.48 | 5.4        | 81                                 | 59    |
| 1931 | 27.89               | .556  | 11.00                   | 19.91 | 7.06       | 90                                 | 71    |
| 1941 | 31.86               | .669  | 14.22                   | 20.4  | 17.6       | 103                                | 85    |

|      |        |      |       |              |       |     |     |
|------|--------|------|-------|--------------|-------|-----|-----|
| 1951 | 36.11  | .802 | 13.31 | 19.93        | 0.1   | 117 | 102 |
| 1961 | 43.92  | 1.08 | 21.64 | <b>34.98</b> | 29.83 | 142 | 138 |
| 1971 | 54.81  | 1.46 | 24.80 | <b>34.95</b> | ----  | 177 | 186 |
| 1981 | *      | *    | *     | *            | 24.66 | *   | *   |
| 1991 | 84.63  | 2.24 | 47.87 | 53.26        | 31.83 | 267 | 286 |
| 2001 | 102.70 | 2.67 | 21.54 | 18.82        | 22.00 | 325 | 340 |
| 2011 | 121.02 | 3.12 | 17.68 | 17.07        |       | 382 | 397 |

SOURCE: CENSUS OF INDIA

(\*There is no census in Assam in 1981.)

The much higher percentage of growth rate in Assam from 1911 to 1971 over the All India and Bangladesh figures indicate migration into Assam. The All India growth rate for 1921 should be treated as an aberration but even in that decade Assam's growth rate was higher than neighbouring Bengal districts which now constitute Bangladesh. The growth rates for Assam in 1971-91 presents a distorted picture unless one relates it to community-wise percentage of growth in Assam as compared to All India figures. The growth of Muslim population has been emphasised to indicate the extent of illegal migration from Bangladesh to Assam because the illegal migrants coming into India after 1971 have been almost exclusively Muslims. This is shown below.

Table:1.2: Decadal growth of Hindu and Muslim Population

| YEAR      | INDIA        |            | ASSAM    |            |
|-----------|--------------|------------|----------|------------|
|           | HINDUS(IN %) | MUSLIMS(%) | HINUS(%) | MUSLIMS(%) |
| 1951-1961 | 20.29        | 25.61      | 33.71    | 38.35      |
| 1961-1971 | 37.17        | 30.99      | 23.72    | 30.95      |
| 1971-1991 | 48.38        | 55.04      | 41.89    | 77.42      |
| 1991-2001 | 20.35        | 36.02      | 14.95    | 29.30      |
| 2001-2011 | 16.76        | 24.65      | 10.89    | 29.59      |

SOURCE: CENSUS OF INDIA

The decadal growth rate for both Hindus and Muslims for the period 1951-61 and 1961-71 was higher than their respective All India growth rate, indicating migration of both communities into Assam. However, during the period 1971-91 Hindu growth rate in Assam was much less than the All India figure. Possibly, this was due to large scale population movement of non-Assamese Hindus out of Assam during the Students movement and subsequent militancy in the State. In the case of Muslims the Assam growth rate was much higher than the All India rate. This suggests continued large scale Muslim illegal migration into Assam. Muslim population of Assam has shown a rise of 77.42% in 1991 from what it was in 1971. Hindu population has risen by nearly 41.89% in this period. As per 1991 census, four districts (Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta and Hailakandi) have become Muslim majority districts. Two more districts (Nowgaon and Karimganj) should have become so by 1998 and one district (Morigaon) is fast approaching this population.

### **Consequences of illegal migration**

**Identity crisis:** The influx of immigrants created a crises of identity among the indigenous. The cultural survival will be in jeopardy, their political control will be weakened and their employment opportunities will be undermined by such illegal migration. The recent Bodo Muslim violence in the Boroland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) area has its root on the issue of illegal migration.

**Environmental degradation:** large areas of forest land were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation. The state experienced declining percentage of land area under forest from 39% in 1951-52 to about 30% now.

**Difficult to identify the illegal migrants:** Due to the similar language spoken by illegal migrants from Bangladesh and the indigenous Bengali speaking Muslim of Assam, it becomes difficult to identify and deport the illegal migration from Assam soil.

**Community tension:** The commission on integration and Cohesion found that tension usually exist with the presence of high levels of migration combine with other forms of social exclusion like poverty, poor housing etc.

**Human trafficking:** In recent decades, trafficking of women and human smuggling has become quite rampant across the borders. Poverty and hunger forces either the parents to sell the girls to traffickers or the girls themselves leave home and fall prey to traffickers.

**Increase financial burden:** Immigration has increased the burden on the part of the state government, as the government has to increase the expenditure on education and health facilities to the immigrants.

**Displacing native workers:** There is a fear that immigrants take jobs which would otherwise be taken by local people, in particular place and circumstances there can be competition and conflict.

**Decreases wage level with the increase in population:** Illegal immigrants in every year have been adding a good number of people in Assam. It is one of the main reasons of population explosion. Due to this there is a possibility of decreasing wage level.

**Assam agitation:** The failure of government to respond the issue of illegal migration led to the Assam agitation or Assam accord under All Assam Student Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad

(AAGSP). Assam witnessed governmental instability, sustained civil disobedience campaigns and worst cases of ethnic violence.

**Disturbance in law and order:** The rule of law and integrity of the country are undermined by the illegal migrants who are engaged in illegal and anti national activities, such as fraudulently acquiring identity cards, exercising voting rights in India and restoring to trans-border smuggling and other crimes.

**Illegal voters:** Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants have got their names enlisted in the voting list illegally, thereby claiming themselves as citizens of the state. The immigrants population act as a vote bank for the political parties in Assam.

**Issues of terrorism:** Pakistan's ISI has been active in Bangladesh supporting militant movement in Assam, It is alleged that among the illegal migrants there are also militants, who enter into Assam to carry out the terrorist activities.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

The decadal growth of population and density of population in Assam has increase at faster rate than all India level due to migration. A problem which has its historical roots so deep cannot be solved overnight. The illegal migration is one of the major reasons for social and ethnic violence in Assam. The dangerous consequences of large scale illegal migration from Bangladesh, both for the people of Assam and more for the nation as a whole, need to be empathically stressed. Illegal migration from Bangladesh is no longer a regional problem which can be pushed under the carpet. These migrants are now spread in several states and distant places. Thus it is high time to solve the problems of illegal migration to save native people of Assam in their own land and to save the nation from the threat of immigrants. The ongoing National Register of Citizenship (NRC) updating should be completed without delay and proper arrangement for the deportation of illegal migrants should be done. It is obligation for state to work for the rights of humans in general especially citizens of the state and tackle the issue of illegal migration very carefully in order to works towards human rights. The governments, both at the centre and in the state, have to treat both issues with equal seriousness.

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