

# Migration as a Factor of Deforestation in North East India and its Socio-Economic Impact with Special Reference to Assam

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**Abstract**---Migration of population is an international phenomenon. Since the ancient period people had been migrating from one place to another in search of better livelihood. So, far as the migration to north east India is concerned, we witnessed a new trend with the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The colonial masters encouraged migration to north east India to meet up the shortage of labour. These migrated people gradually settled in the forest areas and subsequently put pressure on forest with their activities. They cleared the forest areas and turn it in to agricultural land. Thus large scale deforestation occurred during the colonial rule in India. Again the unrestricted migration from neighboring countries especially from Bangladesh affected the rural economy of north east India. In this paper attempt has been made to define migration as a factor of deforestation in north east India as well as in Assam and its socio-economic impact.

**Keywords**--- Colonial, Deforestation, Immemorial, Migration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**M**IGRATION of population is an international phenomenon. Since the ancient period of time people had been migrating from one place to another in search of better livelihood. In Indian context we witnessed various types of migration since the ancient period. In fact the Aryans who constituted the major portion of north Indian population today are migrated from outside of the Indian subcontinent. So, migration and assimilation is two common factors which formed many nations and states in all over the world.

In case of north east India, we came to know about the migration of Tibeto-Burman, Alpine Aryans and lately the Shans or Tais in 13<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. These races migrated to north east India during various periods of time (Bhuyan, S.K, 1974).

However, a new phase of migration started during the British period which not only disturbed the demographic pattern of the states of north east but also threatened the very existence of the native people and their culture. These migrated people largely settled in the various forest areas of Assam and other states of North East India. They not only settled in the forest areas but also cleared vast areas of forest land for agricultural practice. Transformation of large forest areas in to agricultural land led to the deforestation with severe socio-economic and ecological impact. Around 3000 B.C, nearly 80% of India was forested. First era of deforestation began shortly after absorption it into British Empire. In 1894, British Forest Policy accorded priority to

commercial exploitation, state custodianship and permanent cultivation. This resulted with large scale deforestation in following years. India's north east falls under the eastern Himalayas, is known for its rare and exotic varieties of abundant flora and fauna. The rich and verdant rainforests spread over the hills and plains not only provides unique glimpses of nature's bounties but also inseparably connected with the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. The region is the abode of different ethnic groups. About 25.81 percent of the region's population comprised of tribal communities. In some states tribes constitute over 80 percent of the total population of the state. Many of these communities fall into what some describe as 'eco system people' who shares symbiotic relationship with nature and depend on its bounty for their livelihood. Interestingly, the North East with its diverse flora and fauna.

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## II. OBJECTIVES

This paper intended to focus on various causes of international migration to the north east India.

Secondly, the objective of the paper is to study various stages of international migration in north east India.

Again this paper attempted to define migration as a cause of deforestation and its socio-economic impact in north east India.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The universe of study is constituted of the population of forest areas of the North East India .The approach of the present study is historic-analytical.

The secondary data forms the basis of this paper. The secondary data are collected from the relevant books, journals, periodicals and literature in the local libraries. This also includes a study of reports bulletins and souvenir as regarding the forest areas of North East India.

#### IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

So far as the study of migration to the north east India is concerned, we can classify this process of migration in two broad categories.

1) Internal migration and 2) External migration .

Internal migration refers to the migration of people from other parts of the country to a specific area within the geographical boundary of the same country.

External migration refers to the migration from other countries.

In north east India we found both internal and external migration during various courses of time, which begins with a new face since the time British occupation of Assam in 1826 A.D. With the variety in nature of the migration in that period we can divide it in to six broad divisions.

- a) Internal migration of labourers
- b) External migration of Muslim peasants
- c) Internal migration of Hindu Bengalis
- d) External migration of Nepalese
- e) External migration of Hindu Bengali refugees from East Bengal.
- f) Internal migration from other parts of India.

##### Causes of Migration

Migration from the erstwhile East Bengal/East Pakistan and the present day Bangladesh to eastern and north-eastern parts of India has been an ongoing phenomenon. In the aftermath of partition, several lakh Hindus fled from East Pakistan entered in India to escape communal violence. This was also seen during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. In 1965, the then Chief Minister of Assam claimed that over one million "illegal Pakistani infiltrators" had entered eastern India between 1951 and 1961, among these immigrants 220,961 were illegally entered in to north-east India particularly in Assam. Again, thousands of Chakmas and Hajongs fled to India following the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam and the ongoing ethnic conflict in Chittagong Hill Tracts during the 1970s and 1980s. These were the three streams of 'forced migration' that occurred in response to specific incidents and have not continued after the incidents subsidized. However, illegal movement of people from Bangladesh to India continues. The issue has been one of the most complex and hotly debated issues between the two neighbours and also within India.

This cross-border movement of people occurred due to a number of interrelated factors: economic, environmental, religious and political. Among them economic and environment factors have been the key drivers. Bangladesh is one of the most populous and poorest countries in the world. With 130.03 million persons in 2001, the country has one of the highest population density, 881 per sq. km. Further, the country is also highly prone to natural calamities, such as floods, cyclone, drought, riverbank erosion and landslides. Hence, Bangladesh an agricultural country gradually became a major source of labour, but mainly of low-skilled and unskilled workers. Over the years, a large number of people have voluntarily migrated for both long and short-term employment, which is an important livelihood strategy for its large population. Most long-term migration is to the industrialized countries, such as UK and North America.

During the 1970s, labour markets in the Middle East offered a new scope for Bangladeshi migrant workers. Later, such migration also expanded to the newly industrialized countries of South-East Asia. From 1976 to 2002, more than 3 million people migrated overseas for employment. Above all, a large number of Bangladeshis have clandestinely migrated into India, a process that continues unabated. (Guha.A, 1977)

It should be mentioned that in Assam a large portion of waste land were untouched by plough. The British Government wanted to bring this waste land under cultivation. Gradually these areas were flooded with the immigrant population from neighboring country Bangladesh.

Illegal migration from across our borders has continued unabated for over five decades. However, the government of India yet to take stern measure to check it which is a potential threat to the national security. Today, India is a home of about 15 million Bangladeshis, 2.2 million Nepalese, 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamils and about one lakh Tibetan migrants. Demographic changes have been brought about in the border belts of West Bengal, several districts in Bihar, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya as a result of large-scale illegal migration. Such large- scale migration has obvious social, economic, political and security implications. So far as the Indian government is concerned it failed to check the illegal migration effectively. Unfortunately, action on this subject invariably assumes communal overtones, with political parties taking positions to suit the interests of their vote banks. The massive illegal immigration poses a grave danger to our security, social harmony and economic well-being. (Gadgil, 1992).

Bounded by five countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal), the North-East region of India comprising eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura) is connected with the rest of India by just a 22 km-long land corridor passing through Siliguri town in the eastern part of West Bengal. The region accounts for 8.06 per cent of the country's territory and 3.73 per cent of the total population (Census of India, 2001). Characterized by its extraordinary ethnic diversity, the region is inhabited by three distinct groups of people the hill tribes, the plain tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains. Further, most of these states are small in size and population, landlocked and hilly, and have poor communications and transportation infrastructure. Almost all consumer goods are imported from outside the region; and in all these states, non-government employment opportunities are minimal and hence the government is the principal employer. The region also lacks in terms of key development indicators. The continued influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has been of deep concern in the region, as some of these states have experienced a comparatively high growth rate of population in the post-independence period, with illegal immigration widely perceived to be the key factor responsible.

##### *Various Stages of Migration*

With the introduction of tea cultivation in Assam in 1832, the British Government encouraged the people from the populace districts of Bihar, Bengal & Orissa to come to the north east especially to Assam and work as labourers in

various tea gardens. In course of time their population increased in a considerable extent and now they constituted a major portion of population in Assam.

Secondly, the Muslim Peasants started migrating to north east in the early 20th century from the East Bengal districts of Mymensing and Rangpur due to the extra-ordinary rise in the prices of food products and rising pressure of population on land, oppression of the zamindars and the high land rent. The fertile land of Brahmaputra valley and huge uncultivated lands attracted those farmers of Eastern Bengal to settle in Brahmaputra valley.

Thirdly the British brought the educated Bengalis from West Bengal to Assam, who served the British administrative machinery as low grade officials. These Bengali officials not only became permanent resident of Assam but also influenced the Assamese culture significantly.

Fourthly the Nepali migrants came to Assam and settled in forest areas and foot hills of Assam near Bhutan border.

The fifth phase of migration came from neighbouring Bangladesh. The Hindu population of Bangladesh migrated to Assam during the clashes between Hindus and Muslims at the time of partition of India.

Lastly, the people from different parts of India came to Assam for business and services. These people are mainly come from Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Their migration and settlement in north east India caused considerable socio-economic impact on the life of the people this part of India.

#### Deforestation

Compared to the rest of the Indian mainland the north eastern region was brought under British rule relatively late in 1826AD. So, transport, commerce and trade were less developed in this region in comparison to the other parts of India. Although depletion of forests occurred more slowly in the face of limited accessibility, it also meant that government control of the twin scourges of expanding tea plantations established on cleared forest lands and the encroachment of immigrants' peasants from present day Bangladesh on forest lands, were much more ineffective. Additionally the opening of timber mills during the 1920s along with the grant of long term leases on 'exceptionally favorable terms' to Marwari and Bengali contractors resulted in the commercialization of the upper Assam forests. The magnitude of forest losses 1826-1950 are difficult to gauge. Estimates by the Central Forestry Commission reveal a loss of 1763sq. km of forest area in the north eastern region in between 1951-1983. Between 1989 and 1993 this region again lost 1418sq km. These losses in forest cover occurred in spite of community control over forest resources.

Encroachment position in Forest areas in Assam and loss of Forest Areas as on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1996.

TABLE I  
ENCROACHMENT POSITION IN BORDER AREAS OF NORTH EAST

Name Of The Area	No. Of Rf And Prf	Area Encroached (In Sq Km)
Assam-Nagaland Border	10	1017.50
Assam-Meghalaya	31	7.62
Assam-Arunachal Pradesh	30	250
Assam-Mizoram Border	3	2.40

[Rf= reserved forest; Prf = proposed reserved forest of Assam]

TABLE II  
ENCROACHMENT POSITION ON FOREST AREAS ASSAM

S. No.	Name of forest division	Total forest area (in sq km)	Encroachment area (in sq km)	Number of encroachers
1.	Kachugaon	261.04	11.99	577
2.	Aie-Valley	594.51	185.48	8961
3.	Haltugaon	778.23	265.97	16225
4.	Dhubri	not available	18.21	1219
5.	Darrang	172.16	17.80	744
6.	Sonitpur East	541.26	165.93	11467
	Sonitpur West	653.94	139.54	15782
7.	Lakhimpur	699.62	247.57	6546
8.	Nagaon	100.09	4.85	1157
9.	Nagaon South	340.91	10.92	820
10.	Kamrup East	93.87	6.03	1231
11.	Kamrup West	682.43	6.86	998
12.	Kamrup North	127.47	38.55	2533
14.	Doomdooma	189.13	67.33	1241
15.	Digboi	478.36	8.03	386
16.	Dibrugarh	127.26	10.31	187
17.	Sibsagar	223.57	86.26	1926
18.	Golaghat	1036.27	861.18	22081
20.	Cachar	758.58	12.64	1846
20.	Karimganj	767.38	31.22	3360
21.	Karbi-Anglong East	816.69	42.38	2125
22.	Karbi-Anglong West	1026.46	10.55	588
23.	Hamren	48.43	46.65	1938
24.	N.C. Hills	617.66	38.55	1538
Total		11135.32	2334.80	105476

(Source: Department of Forest, Assam)

Assam has lost forest cover in recent years. The actual forest cover to the total geographical area of the state has decreased from 26.50 percent in 1969-70 to 24.58 percent in 2003. There is large scale unabated encroachment in the reserved forests by the new settlers, people displaced by floods and ethnic clashes in the State, immigrants and excessive dependence of the people in the rural areas on the forests leading to deforestation (Handique, R 2004). The forest survey data reveal that loss of forest cover in the state has been increasing over the years. The decrease in total forest cover during the period 2001-03 which was 41 sq. km, increased to 90 sq. km during the period 2003-05. The encroachment in reserved forests is a major concern in the management and conservation of forests. Approximately 12.77 percent of the total forest area in Assam was under encroachment with 70,149 encroacher households as on 2003. The loss of forest cover in the state is attributed to illicit felling of trees in insurgency affected areas of Sonitpur, Darrang and Karbi Anglong. While shifting cultivation has been mainly responsible for loss of forest cover in the districts of North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, Karimganj and Hailakandi in 2005.

An important fall out of the British forest policy in the State was that it introduced an element of exclusion to the communally owned land of the province (by reserving them), if the transfer of ownership rights of these lands to the State were found to profitable to the colonial interests. This led to establishment of property rights to the government on behalf of the contractors and merchants who could exploit them

(Handique. 2004). In several forest blocks of Assam, immigrant laborers encroached upon the forest areas and settled there. The local villagers living outside the reserved forests were allowed to procure forest produce for their own requirements in exchange for ten days labour. The penetration of the non-indigenous population in the exploitation of forests and felling of timber created resentment and anger among the locals, who had been subsequently denied the traditional rights to forests enjoyed by them prior to the advent of British rule in the State. The British forest policy clearly alienated the traditional rights of usage enjoyed by the local people of Assam over the erstwhile communal forests and encouraged commercial exploitation through collusive nexus between contractors and the non-indigenous laborers.

#### *Socio-Economic Impact*

Although the demographic impact associated with unabated illegal immigration in north-east India is still debated upon, there has been widespread anxiety about its impact. There are also certain clinching evidences of the impact it has had. But, there is still lack of clarity due to the clandestine nature of the immigrants who always classified themselves as 'Bengali speakers'. This is again compounded due to inability to accurately distinguish between indigenous Muslims and the immigrants who came after 1971. However, it would be appropriate to see the patterns of the growth of population in Assam and Nagaland which have experienced large scale influx of illegal immigrants.

The growth of population in Assam during 1951-2001 was 136.38 per cent against the national growth rate of 116.30 per cent. In 1951-61, there was a 34.98 per cent increase in the population of Assam as against 21.64 per cent nationally. It was 34.95 per cent in 1961-71 and 47.60 per cent in 1971-1991 (As no census could be taken in Assam in 1981, the population growth rate for 1981-91 was projected at 24.24 per cent). It fell to 18.85 per cent in 1991-2001. The slowdown of population growth during (1981- 2001) is believed to be the impact of the Assam Movement, constant vigilantism and improved policing along the border. Therefore, the Bangladeshis started looking for other destinations.

The rural economy of Assam and other north eastern states adversely affected by the migration of muslims peasants from Bangladesh. It is mentioned earlier that excessive growth of population and acute shortage of food grain forced them to search for a suitable area like Assam. It should be mentioned that in Assam a large portion of waste land were untouched by plough. The British government wanted to bring this waste land under cultivation. Gradually these areas were flooded with the immigrant population from neighbouring Bangladesh (Sinha, 2012).

Again, Assam Bengal and Eastern Bengal Rail Project also encouraged the people to come to Assam as labourers. Many of them settled in Assam permanently.

The other section of people who migrated from East Bengal (Present Bangladesh) crossed the boundary and settled in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam.

Gradually these migrated people spread in all the lower Assam districts especially in undivided Goalpara and Kamrup district. In Assam they tried to settle in forest areas and ultimately succeeded to encroach upon the big forest reserve

like Manas, Kaziranga etc. The weak stand of colonial administration encouraged these migrating people to encroach these forest lands and in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century they came face to face with the native population.

According to the Land Revenue Report, during 1930-40, the vast amount of land (6,162 thousand acres) was settled with Bangladeshi immigrants. In the next decade, 1940-50 the area settled was even larger nearly constitute 8,926 thousand acres (Census of India, 1951). The immigrants occupied in organized way the wastelands particularly grazing and forest land in north east India.

They not only encroached on government reserves but also on lands belonging to the local people mainly the tribal. In this circumstances government tried to avoid future clashes between the local and immigrants by adopting some measures including line system in various districts of Brahmaputra valley.

But during the time of Sir Saadullah government the line system lost its importance and new phase of immigration and settlement in arable lands of Assam began.

Impact of external and internal migration to Assam not only confined in socio-cultural and political aspects but it has a socio - economic, impact in Assam. Assam has an overwhelmingly agrarian economy which is affected by the unrestricted migration from different parts of the country as well as from the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal.

The explosive population growth in recent decades had been a cause of concern for the original inhabitants of the states of north east India. Alongside the inflow of population from East Bengal and Nepal there had also been migration into the state from other parts of the country.

The contribution made by this stream of migrants towards agriculture development of Assam during the earlier phase can't be denied as they intended the area under cultivation reduce waste land, enhanced crop intensity, increased agricultural production and productivity, introduced the cultivation of cash crops like jute, vegetable, tobacco, oil seed, sugar, etc.

However as these migrating people were mainly refugees, so they were not technologically advanced and skilled. At the initial stage they settle in open uncultivated chars and gradually they tried to clear the forest land for cultivation and settlement.

The pressure of population growth on land and lake of diversification of the rural economy badly affected the state in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In fact with the increase of surplus labour in agricultural sector, unemployment rate grows up. Village grazing reserve had to bear the brunt of population increase and it adversely affected the cattle the pressure of population growth on land and lake of diversification of the rural economy of the state.

Having a non-industrial background the immigrants did not make any gain for the economy of the state nor contributed for modernization in agriculture. So, increasing pressure of population created by large scale migration has depressed the rural economy of the state resulting poverty and unemployment among rural masses. Gradually the local inhabitants tribal and nontribal became more conscious about their rights and the problems created by un restricted

migration to Assam. Lately in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we witnessed the rise of regionalism and a mass movement against the illegal migrants from neighbouring countries. Due to indifferent attitude of the government of India these movements turned violent many times resulted to the loss of human life and property.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Large scale deforestation in Assam as well as in north east India has posed a serious threat to the environment. Although depletion of forest covers is not a new phenomenon it began with the commercialization of forest resources during the time of the colonial rule.

Increasing population had always played an important role in deforestation. In north east India large scale immigration population from neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh coupled with natural increase of indigenous population have led to population explosion, thereby putting tremendous pressure on the forest.

However there was no drastic change in the forest Policy of the government in the post independence period. The policy of the British is continued to be followed by the government of India so far as the management of forests are concerned. It is quite obvious that the unrestricted deforestation in North East India have led to significant change in soil composition of the area and thereby drastically altered natural environment in recent years.

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