

## **Human Migration in context of India and Bangladesh: A Theoretical Overview**

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In the year 1980, there was a series of publication of epoch making articles in Economic and Political Weekly revolving around the question of 'Assamese' nationalism resulting from the anti-immigration sentiments. The historic Assam Movement has now become a matter of past, but the intellectual debate that took place in the heydays of the movement did not die down. The article 'Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist' by Amalendu Guha brought much debate in the EPW special edition and that discussion still persist in terms of the continued immigration from Bangladesh. However the question still looms large in regard to whether little nationalism has turned into big communalism in the present context of national political discourse in India.

"It is the function of social science to penetrate the fog of ideology and discern the true shape and sequence of events. The recent disturbances in Assam have once again brought home this lesson to us. The agitation over the presence of so called 'foreign nationals' has grown into a massive movement, bringing out into the streets hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women passionately committed to defending Assam from an alleged 'silent invasion' by foreigners, sowing seeds of deep suspicion and mistrust among different communities who have been living as peaceable neighbours for generations, and causing outbreaks of mob violence in which hundreds have lost their lives and thousands have been uprooted from their homes."

— Hiren Gohain

This write up is the outcome of the quest to see theoretically the migration trends and consequences from Bangladesh to Assam historically in general and the post movement era i.e. 1971 in particular. The fact that bitterness in the history of relations between the Assamese and the Bengalis

on the language issue and the predominance of the Bengalis in the administration has remained as a paranoid for the Assamese middle class. Therefore many scholars like Gohain himself call this insecurity as a hangover from the colonial past which has continued even today. The scenario has further worsened with the continued immigration which has the natural reason to continue and the failure of the 3D (detection, deletion, deportation) policy because of which the sub-nationalist sentiments strengthen by the Assam Movement seemed to transform into unconscious fascist tendencies. Hence along with the age old questions like amount of migration, why they are migrating, how they can be stopped from coming many of which have gained renewed significance due to alternative interpretations, many newer development have also brought some new thinking to this population movement so as to concern to the human side of it, to enquire to the conditions of the immigrants as well as the tendencies of communalisation of the ethnic sentiments due to the political mishandling of this sensitive issue.

Migration is a constant thread that has been running through human history: sometimes dominating, sometimes low-lying. The history of movement of people from one place to another is as old as the history of mankind. The importance of migration in the evolution of the world--- its people, society, culture, economy to the present global labour market through its historical phases of conquest, colonialism, slavery, indenture, mercantilism, industrialisation, fordism, can hardly be overstated. Thus even after the creation of modern nation state in the 18th and 19th centuries with their defined borders, people have continued to move from one country to another. Earlier it was not questioned much; the problem of integration of migrant into the host societies started only when the ethnic diversities became sharp and modern developmental processes made the possibility of social assimilation more difficult. Development logic legitimised organised human endeavours to tame the nature for unrestricted exploitation by man, which naturally made conflicts over resources more acute. In such situations making 'aliens' the scapegoats for one's economic hardship was inevitable (Ghosh: 2004). And then the problem and politics of migration, refugee, displaced and stateless etc began emerging. All these terms have different meanings and attributes. Since the focus of our study is basically related only to the issue of migration, it will be confined to understanding and theorising the pattern in the context of Bangladeshi migration into Assam, one of the states in

India which has seen a massive flow of people from East-Bengal/ East Pakistan/ Bangladesh.

Any study of movement of people from one place to another must first confront some definitional problems. These problems arise because in the modern world, both on account of technological advances as well as growing awareness of the people about their right and well being, international boundaries are difficult to enforce. In the third world, the existence of the cross border tribes and ethno linguistic groups having close cultural and emotional affinities makes the viability of international borders even less (Ghosh: 2004). Migration is defined in different ways on the basis of the nature, scope and purpose of its study. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English migration means- move from one place to go to live or work in another. S.N.Eisenstadt argues migration "as the physical transition of an individual or a group from one society to another. This transition usually involves abandoning one social setting and entering another and different one" (Eisenstadt:1953). He also assumes that every migratory movement is motivated by the migrants feeling of some kind of insecurity and inadequacy in the original social setting. In fact migration may be defined as a movement of person or persons involving a permanent change of residence and migrant is generally a person who moves his residence, either "during emigration, immigration, internal migration"(Dutta:2003).

It is worthwhile to remember that moments and epochs of economic and political restructuring have always provoked, and been accompanied by, demographic movements, both within the subcontinent and across entire continents through group migration (Ascherson: 1995).there has also been a tradition of seasonal mobility across mountains and widespread swamp areas amongst communities like the Chakma, M'to or Mizo or Kuki people in the Patkai ranges on either side of the India-Myanmar- Bangladesh trijunction. Thus, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, indentured labour, mostly landless and poor peasants who had already been moving from hills to plains and from one area to another in eastern and central India were shipped from Calcutta, for manning sugar and coffee plantations, railway construction sites and mines, to the Indian ocean islands, the South Pacific, the Caribbean islands, Guiana in the Amazon delta and to east and south Africa. The historian of this phenomenon, Hugh Tinker, called it a 'new kind of slavery'. Large- scale population movements across borders categorized

as movements of 'refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons' have become, thus, one of the defining characteristics of the post - Second World War global order. Mass population displacements are on the increase. The phenomenon remains seemingly unaffected by the end of the cold war, end of history, rise of regionalism, and a resurgence of nationalism. If anything, those who had predicted the final victory of liberalism backed by a benign state, economic prosperity and economic integration, are now terrified by the 'coming anarchy', which according to the people like Robert D. Kaplan, Paul Harrison, will be most signified by 'break up of nations under the tidal flow of refugees from environmental and social disaster' (Samaddar: 1999). 'Wars will be fought over scarce resources, especially water, and war itself [will become] continuous with crime, as armed bands of stateless marauders clash with the private security forces of the elites' (Kaplan: 1994). In other words, trans-border population flux is being increasingly viewed as a challenge to the neo-liberal world order - a challenge that originates from a combination of technological change, environmental degradation, ethnic unrest and demographic growth (Samaddar: 1999).

The issue of cross- border migration in South Asia, it should be clear that, involves the issue of whole range of rights. But as with regard to the other dimensions of migration, the question of rights too has to be seen in the specific context of South Asia. Since migration in South Asia is an ensemble of communal, economic, historical and environmental elements, the specific situation of the region becomes important. A study like the present one, dealing with trans-border migration from Bangladesh to Assam, therefore could not lose sight of the perspective- how nation- state boundaries have been drawn and subsequently made rigid, cutting into separate parts the erstwhile collective existence of communities in the region. Community networks, not unnaturally, have revived and expanded much in the sense as 'transplanted networks' (Yans: 1990).

### **Context of the study:**

The movement of immigrant population from east Bengal in the pre partition days was not only economic but also political. Immigration particularly of the Muslims from east Bengal into Assam began in large numbers from the beginning of the 20th century. In 1911, the zamindars of Goalpara invited some persons of Muslim community from east Bengal into Assam to settle and cultivate in their lands on better conditions than

were available in east Bengal. The Muslim population of Assam valley districts, excluding Garo hills was 355,320 in 1911. There was a rapid increase in the population and rose to 585,955 in 1921 to 943,252 in 1931 and to 1,305,902 in 1941 (Barua: 1954, 144-146). In the wake of partition equally large number of Hindus and Muslims migrated to India and Pakistan respectively. It is estimated that about 13 million people were involved in the process. During fifties another 4 million each of Hindus and Muslims migrated to India and Pakistan. In the sixties, east Pakistan witnessed frequent communal strife causing exodus of Hindus to India, particularly to the neighbouring Indian states of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal (Ghosh: 2004, 18-19). In the post independent Assam, the problem of immigrants is further complicated and made more acute by the movement of thousands of Hindu refugees. From February 7 to April 8, 1950, the total number of migrants to Assam from East Bengal was 190,350 Hindus and very negligible number of Muslims. After the Indo-Pak Agreement, from 9 April- 25 July 1950, the total number of migrants from east Bengal to Assam was 191,751 Hindus and 46,617 Muslims (Ghosh: 2004, 19). From partition till 1964, the number of such refugees were estimated to be 5.5 million (do, 18).

During Bangladesh Liberation movement, there was unprecedented repression from the Pakistani military junta causing a massive exodus of East Pakistanis to India. An estimate of 10000000 refugees arrived in India. The Census report of India 1971 says that 959826 international migrants came to Assam during the decade. It is obvious from various census reports that migrants are coming to India in various numbers from 1951 to 1971 on different grounds such that search for better living, communal strife due to partition, war related refugees etc. the 1981, census operation could not be done in the state of Assam. The 1981 census reports of the other states of the north eastern region, however, indicate that migration from Bangladesh and Nepal continued unabated. In Assam the fear of illegal migrants (resulting from unchecked flow even during the post-1971 period) outnumbering the indigenous population led to a six year prolonged movement starting from 1979. This fear is haunting the Assamese people psyche till today (Saikia, Goswami, Goswami: 2003, vii).

From 1991 onwards, the census report has shown that the amount of migration from Bangladesh to India and particularly to Assam has decreased as compared to the previous decades. If we analyse the Bangladesh development index, the projects like Gramin Bank, formation of rural self-

help groups and due to the investment of the foreign donors, a large section of Bangladesh population are engaged. The preliminary studies have shown that the districts like Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rangpur, comilla etc are historically the bases from where huge chunk of migrants are coming from. The fact that these districts are the most backward areas of Bangladesh has been the cause of this influx. Again since Brahmaputra is easily accessible to cross the river border hence the immigrants take this route to migrate to other developed cities of India and outside like Gulf, Singapore etc. additionally the social connections and linkages are playing a big role today in this connection.

The 2001 census report of Assam has shown that Cachar, Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nagaon etc.-these districts have highest concentration of migrant populations. The task of the study would be to see the economic, social and political problems faced by these districts due to this influx of Bangladeshi immigrants. The research will also analyse the dilemma of the Assamese Muslims at a time when the immigrant Muslims have outnumbered them; their image and insecurities in the face of communalising the whole issue along with combining security dimensions along with all these developments.

Looking at the migratory pattern and background from the historical sequences, the phenomena of movement of people in the eastern side of Indian subcontinent can be explained through different perspectives and theories at different junctions. It is well known that the present north-eastern states have been the destination of various streams of migrants originating from different parts of the subcontinent even during the post independence period. To start the story from the British period, the extension of the British rule to the region necessitated the influx of population for running the administration; the expansion of the tea cultivation, exploitation of mineral and forest resources for commercial interests necessitated the importation of large number of persons from other parts of India to work as tea garden labourers, a class of landless labourers being absent in the region (Saikia, Goswami, Goswami: 2003).

Here this aspect of migration can be explained through concept of pull factors because newly emerging opportunities were coming up in Assam. Again the formulation of considering migrants as capital constant whereby search for cheap and exploitable labour force rules the present system of international division of labour, hence this Marxist understanding of movement of population can also be fitted in this era of migration to the

North East India.

The next stream of migration was that of Muslim peasants from the then East Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur. Driven apparently by the pressure on the soil at home, and lured by the cheap and plentiful supply of both virgin and exceptionally fertile lands in Assam with the freedom of settlement of the ryotwari system, land hungry peasants from the then East Bengal began to pour into Assam from the beginning of the 20th century. They were enumerated first in the 1911 census. In the words of 1961 census superintendent, these migrants were the advance guards of a huge army following closely. After Saadullah became the Premier of Assam in 1942, it is alleged that he attempted systematic settlement of East Bengali Muslim peasants in the pretext of Grow more Food campaign. The setting up of India and Pakistan did not prove deterrent to the Muslim settlers who continued to pour even after the partition. Apart from this a large number of Bengali Hindu refugees migrated to Assam and Tripura due to communal troubles after the partition. In the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971, a large number of persons from erstwhile East Pakistan fled to Assam and adjoining states.

The 1981 census report of the north eastern states, other than Assam indicated that migration from Bangladesh and Nepal continued unabated. All these developments can be seen in one or the other theoretical perspective. The Push- Pull model of migration can be aptly applied to the migration process of the initial periods, when people migrated to capture the large wasteland in Assam and due to the population burden on resources on the other side. In the subsequent period when the 'initiators' already settled in the vast wastelands, they performed as facilitators of the next chains of migrants to come. Hence the theory of looking at migration as a social process which works in chain can be employed.

The structural- functional approach may also be referred to here because most of the migrants cross the border due to the structural hazards and environment in their homeland in economic and political terms. Along with the economic hurdles faced by them due to unequal development process, the migrating people were also faced with communal conflicts and many development projects like that of the Farakka canal construction also displaced many. Hence many migrated as environmental refugees in later years. The fact that migrating people keeps on moving to different more developed cities in India after entering through Assam or Tripura or Meghalaya, conforms

to the Ravenstein's Law of Migration which states that migration occurs in stages and in wave like motion.

However the concept of 'place of utility' still remains valid as many choose to settle down in Assam rather than moving ahead for more and better opportunities. In 1990s with the coming of the structural adjustment policy in the subcontinent the pattern of migration has also changed. The fact that, many villagers in different parts of Bangladesh have moved to many developed states rather than India shows the relevance of the Cost-Benefit model along with the Equilibrium model which is based on the 'perfect information' guarantee of various opportunities. Thus the above analysis is an attempt to see how migration can be analysed from different vantage points. The aim is to theorise in this research project, most empirically, the immigration pattern of Bangladeshis into Assam in the post 1971 period with special emphasis on the post Structural Adjustment era in this subcontinent. Since the Marxian approach has not been attempted much so far, so the present study is an attempt to fill this gap to certain extent. In the era of free economy and open boundary, it will be interesting to see the relevance or irrelevance of the Marxian perspective to migration and especially between the two developing countries of Asia, both of which have accepted the reformation of its economic policies.

#### **The literature available on the subject is widespread and its selective review**

The study on migration though a vastly covered area, still there is scope to cover many unexplored areas. For instance, the issue of migration of Bangladeshi people to India's north-eastern states, West-Bengal and other places are not theorised enough to have practical solutions to the problem. Rather than seeing it as a law and order problem, no attempt has been made to see the peculiar human issues in this part of the globe because of which they are in a continuous movement, of course causing living problems for the inhabitants of the host places. However there are of course works which are seminal on this burning issue touching on various dimensions.

As per the requirement of this study, the work of E.S. Lee's *A Theory of Migration* deals extensively on the different theories related to human migration in a historical perspective. It has tried to explore various perspectives to look at migration and explain it in terms of Equilibrium verses structural theories, Spatio-temporal model, Gravity model, Push-Pull model,



Behavioural Economic model and Social process model etc. Though studied extensively, the issue of migration has been theoretically handled in European and American perspectives. Hence a greater need is always felt to analyse the given theories in Asian and more particularly in South-Asian context. The attempt by Partha S. Ghosh in *Unwanted and Uprooted* is a theoretical work on migration in South Asia. It is about the history of movement of people considering the definition and classifications of different migratory patterns. It takes a demographic study of the emigrational behaviour emphasising on the dynamic relationship between people's movement and politics of South Asian region. The emphasis of the book on security aspect and economic co-operation for the solution of the problem of migration would be an interesting point to look on in the present study.

In Nabi, Nurun and Krishnan's article in Mahadevan and Krishnan (ed) *Methodologies of Population studies and Development*, Mary M. Kritz (ed) *Global Trends in Migration*, Ong Jin Hui (ed) *Crossing Borders* etc have tried to deal in a theoretical way on a region specific underpinning of migration. But overall, a Bangladesh India migration theme has not been researched particularly on a theoretical basis as such. Again, the Marxist world view of the issue in particular to these two countries needs to be looked upon more specifically; which would be done on the basis of the works like *Immigrant workers and Class Struggle in Advanced capitalism* by M. Castell, *Equilibrium and historical-structural perspective on migration* by C. Wood. However since Marxian approach has not been attempted much so far in India Bangladesh context, so the present study is an attempt to fill this gap to some extent with the help of the western experience.

Apart from the theoretical formulations, the practical issue of the immigration like historical root cause in domestic and international dimensions of the issue will be looked into. Books like *India against itself* by Sanjeev Baruah, *Rites of Passage* by Sanjoy Hazarika, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* by Amalendu Guha explains in detail how and why people from East Bengal and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) moved in large numbers for many decades from the last decades of 19th century. The point that those people migrated for pure livelihood reasons in search of Lebensraum has been argued strongly by these books and this has been the continuing major cause of migration from across the border even today apart from many other factors.

The case that all these writer emphasised that migration has brought

changes and problems mainly political to the people of north-eastern India, but it has been and would remain a natural phenomenon in case of this reason due to historical and geographic reasons. This perspective would help the present work tremendously to contextualise the present pattern of migration historically. In the book *Population Growth in Assam from 1951-1991* by Anil Saikia, Homeswar Saikia and Atul Goswami, there is an estimation of the volume and trend of population growth in Assam during 1951-1991 with special focus on the migration. It seeks to put at rest the wild speculations regarding the volume of migration made by different interest groups to their convenience. The book would be of special significance to the research due to its huge pile of scientific database against many wild speculations. The research work by immigrant Assamese writer Ismail Hussain's *National life of Assam and Immigrant Assamese Muslims* basically deals with the history of migrating Muslims to Assam and their life and living after their settlement with special reference to the process of assimilation. The writer emphasised on Assamese nationality formation which he commented still continuing through the process of assimilation.

Apart from these the reaction of the indigenous people of India and different political parties as well as pressure groups also needed to be looked into. The edited book *'Nationality Question in Assam'* by Abu Nasser Syed Ahmed is a very significant attempt in this regard. The book basically deals with some of the debates that took place in 1980s revolving around the issue of rationality of the Assam Movement that occurred because of the perceived threat on Assamese nationality by the influx of thousands of illegal migrants to Assam. The articles in the book are basically covering two diametrically opposite views, one supporting the rationale, strategy and nature of the movement and the other attempted at exposing the intolerant and chauvinistic dimension of it imperilling the basic foundation of the composite society of Assam. The articles written by Amalendu Guha, Hiren Gohain, Udayan Misra, Tilottama Misra, Gail Omvedt and Sanjib Baruah provided many new dimensions of the problem of migration while critically engaging with the whole genre of the Assam Movement. Some of the articles also focus on the stand and role of many important political parties on the issue of immigration and the movement.

Honestly speaking the debates compiled in the book have given an insight to have an alternative view of the whole migration issue of Assam and to see in detail if any particular perspective could give proper understanding

of the whole scenario. However an overall and independent attempt on the position of different political parties lacks in this regard which would be attempted in this work through party manifestoes, local newspapers and interviews etc.

Another important aspect of the issue would be to attempt to provide suggestions so as to pacify the existing panic among the indigenous people of Assam due to the Bangladeshi migration as well as to make possible for the already migrated population to make a humane living possible here with special eye on if migration can be restricted in future or can they be totally legalised. In this attempt the suggestions made by Sanjoy Hazarika in *Rites to Passage* regarding identity cards for the Indian citizens, quota system, work permit for the Bangladeshis etc. and the faith of Amalendu Guha on the assimilation process of these immigrants to contribute to the growth of greater Assamese nationality would be examined in detail. The logic of mainstream writers like Udayan Misra and Sanjeeb Baruah in 'Periphery Strikes Back' and 'India Against Itself' respectively which press on the 3D policy (Detect, Delete and Deport) as a solution of the issue will also be examined from a human rights angle when government of the other side continuously deny any emigration from their country. The work of Claude-Valentine Marie 'From the Campaign against Illegal Migration to Campaign against Illegal Works' which concentrates on the prevention of the illegal employment to automatically prohibit the illegal migration and the suggestion of W.R. Bonhing in 'Helping migrants to stay at Home' would give a useful insight if the experience of the developed countries could be employed in South Asian context.

Therefore the prime concern of this work is to give a holistic picture of the issue of Indo-Bangladesh migration contextualised in Assam, ranging from a theoretical setup, historical antecedents, present problems at both ends as well as the suggestive recommendation to have a humane consideration of the problems arising out of the process without jeopardising the security aspect of nation states.

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