

# The Unspoken Prospects of Migration in Assam and Bangladesh: The need to speak of the least spoken forces and some unattended realities

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## **Introduction**

Migration is not a new phenomenon, neither in case of Assam or other parts of the world. Human history is a history of migration. Time and again people have migrated from place to place and settled down to form civilizations. The movement of people from one place to the other continues till date. The difference is that earlier the movements were not restricted but presence of physical borders in the modern times has restricted the movements to a great extent. However, in case of Assam of North-east India and neighbouring Bangladesh, when boundaries are not permanent and keeps changing constantly due to the floods and displacing hundreds and thousands of families every year, movement and settlement becomes more complicated and challenging. There are historical and geographical evidence of rivers and tributaries around these borders changing courses which in turn changes the geographical boundaries of the region. Migration, in this case, if considered only from the political discourses detached from geographical phenomenon and social consequences that follow would be too narrow an analysis. However, the question is then who gets to decide which side these displaced people should be settling aftermath of any natural remapping? How does one reconfigure the geographical maps and re-draw boundaries? Amongst all these contestations, who will listen to the plight of the people being actually affected in the process? To understand all these questions, if not possibly answer, we must carefully go through the history of migration in North-east India and Bangladesh from a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional way. Along with political and social causes, which are of utmost importance, environmental and cultural dimensions are to be studied with careful observation.

## **A comparison of India and Bangladesh**

In case of India and Bangladesh, both are poor and impoverished countries. Both rank poorly in the Human Development Index. The question is then that why migrate to India? One reason might be that the former is comparatively better off than the other. India's economy is growing faster than the latter. Therefore, migrating for better economic opportunities and improved living conditions is one of the basic reasons. Another reason which Sanjoy Hazarika points out is that the pressure and availability of land per person is less in Bangladesh. Yet, another reason might be geographical proximity. Then why not migrate to Nepal

or Bhutan? One needs closer observation and detailed research to answer such a simple yet a very comprehensive question.

Migration may be both forced and unforced. If we look at the migration trends from Bangladesh to North-East India, specifically Assam, one can see both the trends. The first being taken place during the liberation of East Pakistan, when more than 9 million refugees fled the brutal atrocities of Pakistani forces. The second trend, however, is controversial and is still and bone of contention, officially and unofficially, between the two countries. This contention is much higher and bitter within the Indian state, between the centre and the state of Assam which reflects the failure of the centre to bring a long term solution to the problem and also the failure of co-ordination between the central and the state government regarding the issue. The failure of IMDT Act is an example of such failure. The rejection of its own people by the Bangladesh government and the failure to accept the reality of migration that has been taking place since decades is holding back the issue from getting any permanent solution.

Migration is a result of a series of factors, both natural and man-made and Bangladesh is not an exception. Both the factors are dynamic and sometimes quite readily visible, such as the devastating floods every year. According to B. G. Varghese no other country faces flood problem with the magnitude with which Bangladesh does. We often attend the most common reality or the most commonly spoken prospect of migration, i.e. the religious anxieties, as in the case of migration from Bangladesh. But we need to understand that this issue is multi-dimensional and re direct our focus on the least popular prospects of migration. One also needs to focus on the fact that migration is not always unforced or voluntary. People don't always migrate just because they feel so. Sometimes they are forced to migrate with no other options left. However, we cannot deny the fact that people mostly migrate because they are attracted to better prospects of life. But in case of migration from Bangladesh, a very few would acknowledge the fact that they have crossed the border, in this case illegally, because of the fear of prosecution by the local police, law and non-acceptance by the local people. Unfortunately, such accounts have no statistical existence and rather make it difficult to assess the situation.

One of the major reasons behind the forced migration from Bangladesh is the demographic trigger. The ratio of population to the availability of land in Bangladesh is imbalanced. The land pressure is too high and it makes impossible for Bangladesh to sustain its own population. The stakes becomes so high that the individuals and social groups are forced to move out from the land and seek survival in other areas. In the case of Bangladesh the other area becomes India in general and Assam in particular. Bangladeshi migration is an example of demographic tragedy.

Another reason for such migration is environmental degradation which fuels poverty and in turn triggers migration. We are vulnerable and dependent on natural resources. Bangladesh and India has been politically vocal about the struggle over the sharing of water from the river Ganges.

The problem with the studies of migration in North-east and Bangladesh is that it has more or less been analysed politically (More focussed on electorates). The issue is not merely that people are crossing the

borders illegally and the solution is not simple as just sending them back through deportation. We often tend to ignore the shared sense of common culture, the multiple reasons behind the continued flow, the need for a more combined effort, not only the governments of the respective countries, but the people who actually share the space together (both migrated and the host communities). If the host community thinks that violence and resistance can stop the migrants from coming, then one cannot really hope for a long term solution based on these strategies. In this case let us remind us of the Nellie Massacre. That's all together a different story to tell. But the point is, did that create fear among the Bangladeshi immigrants not to cross to this side anymore? The answer is NO. Most of the literature on migration in North-East and Bangladesh stresses on the politics of migration and the unforced nature of migration. We are confined to the walls of forced and unforced, forced is acceptable (under terms and conditions, in this case under constitutional laws) and unforced is bad and unacceptable. Hence, they are tabooed as unwanted. And as Myron Weiner defines, unwanted are those who have been rejected by the host community. The immigrants from Bangladesh have long been rejected by the Assamese community and continue rejecting them. The Assam movement (1979-1985) and the protests by the All Assam Student's Union laid concrete foundation for such rejection. In a situation when their own government (Bangladesh government) doesn't accept them (Bangladeshi immigrants), the host (Assamese) community is determined to push them back, where will these people go? Who are going to accept them? Are they going to be stateless in the near future? Then how do we differentiate between them and the refugees who are also in a state of statelessness? Are these people going to be called immigrants at all? Or what new recognition is going to define them? Does it matter to them at all?

Seldom have we failed to realize the forces behind the unforced. The social and environmental forces are rarely spoken of. Therefore, we really need to take a deep dive into the unspoken prospects of Migration in North-east India and Bangladesh.

### **Assam and its issue of migration**

The most popular debate on migration in Assam is revolved around the fear of demographic change, which is not new in Assam. It has been there before independence and reached its peak during Partition. The famous debate between Mohammad Saadulla of the Muslim League and Gopinath Bordoloi of Congress in the 1930s regarding this fear is noteworthy. The former was accused of trying to ship Muslims to the North-eastern region. Rather than the fear (fear of foreign aggression) which is official in nature, unofficially there is utmost hatred towards people of a particular element (the religious element). To taboo someone as Bangladeshi who is a Bengali speaking Muslim is a fact which may be officially denied. The irony is Assam became a homeland to migrated people even before the creation of Bangladesh (from East Pakistan), yet those who migrated before 1971 and during and aftermath of partition are also termed as 'Bangladekhi'. This reflects of how poorly informed the people are about the different waves of migration or might be the possibility of conscious ignorance out of sheer hatred towards the migrated population.

There is hypocrisy on the part of the Assamese society regarding the issue that migrant from Bangladesh will disturb the fabric of language and culture of the Assamese society. Assam has been a homeland to intra-state migration from a long time. Workers from Orissa were brought by the British to work in the tea plantations and they eventually settled down permanently in the tea estates and assimilated with the Assamese culture. However, the migrants from Bihar have been working in Assam in the informal sector from time to time. They form a big part of the Assamese labour force and the remittances are sent back to Bihar. These migrants from Bihar are reluctant, if not resisting, speaking the Assamese language and they are not very eager to adopt themselves to the Assamese culture and society. These, however, are not official records. But the point is that Assamese society does not seem to be threatened at a very high magnitude from the Behari migrants regarding the change in the language and cultural fabric of the Assamese society. However, ironically, the migrated population from Bangladesh (whether legal or illegal), has been assimilating with the Assamese society, language and culture. They speak the Assamese language (if not proper, mostly broken), their children are enrolled in Assamese medium schools and eventually get acquainted with what is regarded as greater part of the Assamese society.

How far is the constitution reliable as a means of problem solving (in this case the problem of migration)? Provided that it has not been able to solve the problem of the region brings such a question. The very fact that IMDT Act of 1983 was brought in the first place, despite it being unconstitutional (IMDT was repealed in 2005 by the Supreme Court by declaring it unconstitutional), makes one look into the constitution with suspicion. Why was it approved by the Supreme Court at that time and repealed by the same after two decades? How do the Supreme Court justify itself for taking so long in deciding between what is constitutional and what is not? Is it because those in power at the centre influenced the judiciary? Then how independent is our judicial system? These questions involve political stakeholders and an unbiased analysis becomes extremely difficult.

We are always carried away by simple solutions like chase the foreigners away. What is needed right now is a more pragmatic and multi-dimensional approach to provide new insights to this age long and persistent problem. Stephan Castles makes a very important point in the starting his book on Migration. Origin societies are very hopeful about the economic change brought about by the diaspora from their income abroad. However, the origin society when becomes the host community to migrants, becomes too concerned about changes in the social, economic, political fabric of their society. This hostile attitude sometimes leads to violent racist attacks. The increased political salience of migration is also reflected in the violence of the extreme radical right winged parties and the anti-immigrant movements. This is also reflected in the growing xenophobia among the host communities.

### **Globalization and its prospects on migration**

We live in an age where we constantly talk about globalisation and movement of people (along with other movements) taking place that cut across boundaries, but as host communities none is ready to accept the movement to their habitat. Yet they themselves are hopeful about moving to a better place where they will

have better economic entitlements. They are also positive about economic development in their society with foreign remittances. Here, one might argue that those remittances comes from legal migrated, hence justified. But the reality is that the heart of migration, legal or illegal, lies in seeking a better life opportunity (better economic, social, environmental opportunities). Of course it would be too much to expect political rights in a new place but the host community should be able to provide social security to the immigrants to provide protection against violence in any form.

Host communities around the world are particularly more suspicious towards the migration of Muslim population. Most of the anti-migration movements carry the agenda of driving away Muslims from their country, India not being an exception. The right winged party BJP has been directly or indirectly vocal about a Great Hindu Rashtra from the beginning. The problem of migration in North-eastern part of India from Bangladesh, particularly Assam has been an area of sensitivity since decades. The people of Assam have been dealing with the fear of demographic change and a change in the social fabric of an authentic Assamese identity. If not xenophobic, Assamese people have certainly become more aggressive towards the Bengali Muslims who have migrated from East Pakistan and continues to migrate from present Bangladesh. But the fear of demographic change is not new. It has been there even before independence.

## Conclusion

There is no tampering with the fact that both the centre and the state governments have failed to incorporate an umbrella solution to the problem. Both the countries have failed in initiating and actually giving effect to bilateral talks regarding this issue. There has been a lack of strategic doctrine on both sides. Instead of throwing mud at each other, both the nations should realize the vitality of increasing the ability to deal with the issue. There is a need to revisit the question of nationality on both sides. Eminent Scholars like Stephan Castles, Sanjay Hazarika and Sanjib Baruah has provided a lot of viable solutions to the issue of migration which would bring long term peace to the region. The government needs to constantly approve and experiment any of the possible solutions suggested by the experts. If not immediate peace, it will at least minimise uncertainty of the people with an uncertain future.

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