

DIASPORA AND ENSUING ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM AND NORTH EASTERN INDIA

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Abstract : Diaspora and ensuing ethnic conflicts in the context of Assam and North Eastern India

1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient, medieval and modern-day migration of different communities, religions and castes have led to the emergence of diversity observed in India and across the world. This is virtually a continuous phenomenon with over 270 million migrants at the present point in time. As a result, communities have witnessed the power of diversity / changing composition of work forces, greater innovation, diffusion of cultures along with the rise in conflicts.

Geophysical factors, Islamic fundamentalism coupled with socio cultural issues have created a major issue in Assam adversely impacting various sectors. This migration has contributed to the rise of subversive elements like ULFA(I), which under the guise of preserving Assamese identity has indulged in anti-national activities.

I. Methodology

This paper will examine selected case studies of people and communities which have suffered the impact of illegal migration and will provide directions to bring about unity in diversity as well as cementing Assam's bonds with the rest of India

This paper will also look at international case studies where countries have dealt with the phenomenon of ethnic conflict emerging from illegal migration. The paper explains the phenomena both with quantitative and qualitative natures. It is based on the secondary data derived from books, journals, articles, websites and government sources as well, along with the author's personal experience as a PhD scholar and senior law enforcement professional. Observational method is also used for analysing the data.

Observation –

In an attempt to provide an overall definition, Steven Vertovec (1997) argues that the concept of diaspora refers at the same time to a social form created by the scattering, displacement of a population, a form of social identification, and a mode of cultural expression. Other definitions of diaspora range from describing them as grounded on the existence of a voluntary or involuntary dispersion from a mythicized homeland, nourishing a troubled relationship with the country of settlement (see e.g. Safran 1991, 83–84), others have underscored the importance of processes of collective identification and mobilization, 'through a developed internal organizational framework and transnational links' (Adamson and Demetriou 2007, 497).

Diaspora groups originating from conflict areas like Myanmar are suspected of 'importing' these conflicts in their countries of residence, and of organizing destabilizing activities through transnational underground networks. In these discourses, diasporas originating from conflict zones are depicted as potential security threats, raising indiscriminate suspicion towards entire communities (Sheffer 1994).

Assam has been a subject of both legal as well as illegal migrants over the years, notably a large influx of immigrants from East Pakistan beginning from the 19th century onwards to a peak during the 1971 Bangladesh war. The flow of Muslim migrants seems to be continuously prevalent, as it is observed. The AASU (All Assam Student's Union) and AGP (Assam Gana Parishad) triggered the Assam movement in the 1980s for the detection and eviction of foreign nationals from the state and the granting of greater autonomy. The movement came to an end after signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, and subsequent elections enabled the erstwhile AASU leaders to form the new AGP government in Assam. 1979 saw the emergence of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), professing to create a sovereign Assam, riding on the perceptions of neglect from the centre as well as the influx of migrants, threatening the cultural DNA of Assam. The means adopted were violent and soon enough disenchantment among the public grew towards ULFA.

The core issues remained centred around both refugees as well as illegal migrants, in the absence of a National Migration or Refugee Policy.

Unlike a refugee, an illegal migrant is a person who crosses an international boundary and without any valid document, enters another country for the purpose of carrying on any illegal or anti-social activities in that country or for other economic or political purposes. According to Section 2(b) of The Citizenship Act, 1955, an "illegal migrant" means a foreigner who has entered into India: (i) Without a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf; or (ii) with a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf but remains therein beyond the permitted period of time. Illegal migrants have been defined in Assam Accord as those who infiltrated illegally after 24 December 1971. However, the stream that infiltrated illegally between 1st January 1966 and 24th December 1971 was not to be deported and was to be given Indian citizenship after a lapse of ten

years. Let us examine the history of this phenomenon.

Migration continued unabated throughout the entire 19th century. This influx was accounted to availability of cheap and an immense supply of uncultivated lands and low income levels in East Bengal. The migrants were primarily from Sylhet and Rangpur districts to Goalpara and other areas in Assam. This is evidenced by the fact that their proportion in the overall population of Goalpara rose from 1.4% in 1880-91 to 30% and above in 1901-11. The pre-colonial and post-colonial Assam was thinly populated with abundance of land and thereby the state's contribution to the exchequer was far below the expected. As a result, migration was encouraged from East Bengal. Even at that point in time, it was felt that workers from there were perceived to be more industrious, hardworking and were content with lower pay. Feudalism and oppression in East Bengal was far higher than in Assam and that too was a contributory factor in this phenomenon. Ethnic conflict in the Northeastern region is the result of modernization, uneven economic growth and a perception of alienation, first from the British Raj and now from the republic of India.

As diasporic groups are multiple and internally heterogeneous, conflicts are likewise intricate processes that can be distinguished according to their types, stages or dimensions. The interrelations between conflict configurations and the formation or mobilization of diasporas are therefore many sided. The standard perception of the idea of conflict as the cause of diaspora formation and a shared heritage (at least in terms of transmitted memory) among a specific diasporic group does certainly not capture the multiple realities of diaspora experiences. There has been an emergence of the concept of victim diaspora such as the Kurds. This notion, however, is not relatable to the multiplicity of linkages between migration and violence. It excludes for instance the possibility that those who have fled their country and established abroad might not be only 'victims' but also count among them perpetrators of violence (as evidenced in the case of Rwanda). During the British period between 1905 and 1947, for the purpose of maximizing revenue collection by increasing the output from fallow lands, doors were opened up to scores of landless peasants from East Bengal. By 1950, they had occupied 150,8000 acres of land, sowing the seeds for a potential ethnic conflict. During the 1947 partition, a massive wave of millions of refugees crossed over into Bengal and Assam as a result of communal riots. 1971 saw ten million Bangladeshis crossing over into Assam and the local population saw itself under threat economically, socially, culturally as well as psychologically. "Foreign infiltration is the biggest problem of Assam even today. It has impaired the political, economic and demographic balance of the state and made the planned development of the state almost impossible. With the passage of time it is becoming a growing menace endangering the very existence of the state of Assam and the integrity and safety of India" opined Shri Gaurishankar Bhattacharya, a celebrated intellectual of Assam in his seminal work, Assam: An epitome of India. Furthermore, Lt General SK Sinha, as the then Governor of Assam wrote in context of the report he had submitted to the then Prime Minister Shri IK Gujral, "I found that the root cause of the alienation of the people of Assam was the illegal migration from Bangladesh changing the demography of Assam with all its adverse political and economic impact."

Briefly, Bangladeshi infiltration has been due to conflicts, economic issues, unemployment, fundamentalist elements, environmental degradation and so on, which was then exacerbated by the easy forms of entry in the 70s and at the times of the British Raj. The illegal migrants have often masked themselves under the 'victim diaspora' moniker which has also been misused to usher in radical Islamic fundamentalist discourses leading all the way to threats to national security.

As a result of high rates of illegal immigration, there has been significantly higher growth rates among the Muslim population. This demographic imbalance led to the rise of resentment and simmering conflict.

On the socio-economic front, the number of agricultural laborer increased to 15%, whereas the number of real agriculturists recorded a decline of about 13%. The reason being that a large number of them employed laborers to till the land. More often than not, these were illegal immigrants.

In an environment, where over 17 lakh educated unemployed exist, coupled with other related issues across the blue collar sector, illegal migrants cut into job prospects of the local population.

Social consequences of illegal migration mainly centred around the following :-

The crisis of identity - The influx of immigrants created a crisis of identity among the indigenous Assamese. The sheer demographic skew seems to be undermining the core tenets of Ahom culture and the rampant spread of Madrassas adding to this perception. Migrants make almost no effort to build lasting bonds with the indigenous population, in a sharp contrast to the bonhomie which exists vis-à-vis local Muslims.

1. Environmental degradation - Large areas of forest land were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation.
2. Community tension - Fractures usually exist with the presence of high levels of migration combine with other forms of social exclusion like poverty, poor housing etc.
3. Economic consequences - Immigration has increased the financial burden and pressure on the part of the state government, on account of rising infrastructural expenditures, notably health and education to address this group.

This issue of migrants leading to conflicts is not unique to Assam or India. Developing countries as well as developed countries across the world are beset with some of these issues.

In a global context refugees create risk factors for new cycles of conflict, generating further refugee flows. Countries that host disproportionately large numbers of refugees without adequate support like Italy and Spain have a propensity to be destabilized, resulting in developing greater friction across economic, political and cultural fault lines. The legacy of today's refugee populations is a generation of young people who lack economic prospects, political representation, or even participation. Around half of refugee children receive no schooling. In this situation, refugees, who in some cases encounter hostility from their host countries' populations and security forces, become easy prey for Islamic radicalization.

In 2015 and 2016 the EU experienced an unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants. More than 1 million people arrived in the European Union, most of them fleeing from war and terror in Syria and other countries.

The EU has agreed on a range of measures to deal with the crisis. These include trying to resolve the root causes of the crisis as well as greatly increasing aid to people in need of humanitarian assistance both inside and outside the EU. Steps are being taken to relocate asylum seekers already in Europe, resettle people in need from neighboring countries and return people who do not qualify for asylum. The EU is improving security at borders, tackling migrant smuggling and offering safe ways for people to legally enter the EU. There have been attendant conflicts arising out of joblessness, terrorism and cultural erosion of the host countries. The EU border agency Frontex has been strengthened considerably as well.

Suggested Measures –

There are a range of measures the state as well as the community needs to take to minimise the ethnic conflicts arising out of this phenomenon.

The National Register of Citizens already implemented in Assam is a valuable first step, as per the Supreme Court of India guidelines, in addressing the root cause of this issue.

Other possible steps would include some of the following –

1. Strengthening Assamese identity – Here all the stakeholders need to identify the core tenets of the Ahom identity, encompassing music, literature, language as well as the teachings of the legendary polymath Sant Srimanta Sankardeva and disseminate it through education at schools and colleges, as well as institution building, further strengthening efforts in this direction.
2. Strong law enforcement – We have been following a zero tolerance policy as regards fundamentalism and anti-national activities. We are already benchmarking next generation technology and global best in class means to address this.
3. Skill development and education - Using cutting edge technologies and platforms, a greater boost to skill building efforts is underway to boost up economic security of citizens.

References:

1. Shri Gaurishankar Bhattacharya, Assam: An epitome of India.
2. Lt General SK Sinha, the then Governor of Assam
3. Steven Vertovec (1997)
4. Safran 1991, 83–84
5. Adamson and Demetriou 2007, 497.

