

## Poverty and Immigration: Case Studies on Assam

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### ABSTRACT

Poverty is being witnessed as one of the devastated sins for the people. Immigration has been appeared as one of the major issues of the millennium in Assam politics. Both the term 'poverty' and 'immigration' are correlated as most of the poverty ridden people migrated illegally for their livelihood. Data shows that maximum number of poorer families have become victimized of natural catastrophic as well as state's unwillingness to accommodate their demands. In a nutshell, they don't have any voice in the political landscape. Therefore, present study is an attempt to analyze the correlation between these two. For this purpose, we would be taking the help of some of the landmark cases that signify its relationship. The present work is also an attempt to analyze the impact of National Registrar of Citizens and its effect on marginalized sections of the society.

**KEYWORDS:** poverty, immigration, NRC, marginalization, livelihood

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'poverty' has become a buzzword. Nowadays, many people such as the intellectuals, politicians, researchers, economists, etc., all speak about the problems caused due to poverty, though not all agree on the same. Poverty is not just a phenomenon or a state of affairs or an issue. It is more than that. Poverty can be seen from various angles; as a growing issue, a social problem, an individual problem, a small or a big phenomenon. Poverty is a problem, and also is a result of the impact of the political process and the policies developed (Alcock, 1997).

The Oxford dictionary defines poverty as the state of being very poor, or the state of being lacking in quality or amount. The manifestations of poverty include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education, and the other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion, and also lack of participation in decision making process. Poverty is the failure of basic capabilities to reach certain minimally acceptable levels (Amartya Sen, 1992).

Immigration, in general, means migration of people or groups of people without proper documents from

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one geographical area to another due to agricultural stagnation, inadequate job opportunities in the native country, lack of educational development, and unwillingness of the state to accommodate the demands of the marginalized sections with many others. Illegal migrants usually tend to move to bordering countries by taking shorter moves than long distant moves and rural people tend to migrate more than the urban population (Ravenstein, 1885). They also prefer to occupy the unsettled land areas (*char*).

Poverty by immigration is one of the catastrophes that lead to deprivation, social exclusion and relative inequality. It harms social solidarity. Illegal migration or self-inflicted migration drives up the number of poor across countries. Globally, United States, India, Russia, Ukraine and Germany are the home of illegal migrants containing 40% of the world's migrants (Dwivedi, 2015). The principal cause of immigration is poverty; others are low wages, unemployment, lack of livelihood security in the native land and better living conditions in the foreign country, porous border, religious persecution, cultural affinity with the foreign land etc.

Ernst Georg Ravenstein, the originator of modern migration research states that migration increases in volume with the rise of industries and commerce along with transport facilities. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their writings wrote about the capitalism and how it has mobilized the working sections for the motive of production with lowest 'surplus value'. The new approaches on migration studies focus on international migration and immigration.

### **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Poverty and immigration have occupied a central position in politics of the world and also in the politics of Assam. According to UNDP report, in 2015, more than 700 million people, or 10 per cent of the world's population still live in extreme poverty and is struggling to get the basic necessities such as education, health, hygienic water and sanitation, etc., and one person in every ten is extremely poor. There are 122 women living in poverty against every 100 men of the age group between 25 to 34, and more than 167 million children are at risk of living in poverty by 2030 (United Nations). Assam is the habitat of 31 million people, one third of who are poor (World Bank group).

The 1<sup>st</sup> goal of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals is 'No poverty', which aims at eradicating poverty in all its forms. While there has been widespread progress in eradicating poverty, but the persistence of poverty still remains a major concern in the Third World nations, especially Africa. In India, the eradication of poverty and the immigration issues have always been the major concerns of the policy makers. Poverty is now widely considered as multidimensional problem as both national and global level.

India shares a porous border with Bangladesh. The state of Assam shares its border with Bangladesh with a length of 267.30 km, out of it 223.068 km is land border and 44.232km are water stretches. The Brahmaputra River has a stretch of 32.750km in Dhubri District of Assam. This river stretch is unfenced; 19.55 km is unfenced land border. Thus, total unfenced border is 63.79 km (Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha and Ors v Union of India, 2012). Why do people illegally cross the border is still an unresolved question. There are certain "pull" and "push" factors with regard to immigration from Bangladesh to Assam. "Push" factors from the Bangladesh side comprise:

1. Sharp and incessant boost in population;
2. Worsening condition in land-man ratio;
3. pitiable performance in agriculture and as a result low rates of economic growth;

The "pull" factors on Indian side contain:

1. Ethnic and linguistic proximity and kinship facilitating easy shelter to the immigrants;
2. Better economic opportunities;
3. Both religious and political elements also help in increment of immigration;

Keeping all these as the background, the present study would be constitutive of establishing relationship between poverty; immigration and rural development along with inter linkages between poverty, immigration and National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam.

### **OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY**

The objective of the present study is to analyze the linkage between immigration and poverty with regard to rural development in Assam. As the immigration issue is quite predominant in the Assam political discourse, therefore, it has also a close linkage with the citizenship determination process through National Register of Citizens (NRC). Another objective of the study is to understand how, over a period of time, Assam has been a victim of both immigration and poverty. What is crucial to analyze that national poverty rate has been increased with immigrant's poverty.

The methodology applied in the present study is of mixed method. Secondary data collection from the Census Report of India covering the period 1971-2011 has been utilized. Along with that other governmental reports, relevant books, newspaper articles, periodicals, research reports and journals etc. have been consulted to consolidate the arguments of the paper. That data that have been collected, analyzed with the help of statistical method through percentage measuring. Overall, data is presented with diagrams for clear investigation of the problem.

### **ARGUMENTS AND ANALYSIS: POVERTY, IMMIGRATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Migration, since the time of inception, has been there. People always tend to migrate from one place to another. For different reasons people always look forward to migrate from one place to another. While migration is often found as a two-way traffic, but in case of India it is quite different. Most of the Indians migrate to different developed countries in search of better economic opportunities. India also, has a great intake of migrants from the neighboring countries such as Nepal, Tibet, Sri-Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh and so on. But the problem that arises here is due to the illegal migrants that crosses the border without the knowledge of the Indian authority and silently resides in this part of the border. This cross-border immigration is the cause of concern for

many countries as it may impact the socio-economic and political situation of the host country. Open and poorly managed borders and also the absence of proper immigration policy in India has greatly encouraged illegal cross border immigration. Some corrupt border guards, who let the immigrants to pass the border fence in lieu of some money and the vote bank politics of certain political leaders has furthermore encouraged the illegal immigration.

Immigration and poverty have always been interconnected to each other. Some say poverty is the reason for immigration, while some says immigration is the cause for poverty. People migrate to a different region in order to escape the clutches of poverty in their native place. According to the UN bodies, migration can reduce poverty and stimulate economic and social development if conducive policies are operational at global, regional and national levels, reflecting the interest of both origin and destination areas (Global Migration Group, 2010). Though some immigrants find themselves in serious debt, which they are unable to repay and fall in more difficulties.

For decades, the Eastern and North-Eastern parts of India have been receiving illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. According to a survey conducted by the Indian Statistical Institute in 2002 - 2003, mostly they have economic reasons for migrating, such as poverty and the lack of employment opportunities, along with political instability in their native state. These immigrants adjust by taking up cheap labor in the informal sector such as construction laborers, rickshaw pullers and rag pickers and are more willing

to take up the jobs which native workers normally avoid. The Bangladesh authorities too doesn't officially recognize those immigrants and in 2003, Morshed Khan, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh said that not even a single unauthorized Bangladeshi resides in India. But ironically, in a talk between Prime Minister of India and Prime Minister of Bangladesh in February 1972, the later assured to return of all Bangladesh nationals who had taken shelter in India since 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 (Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha and Ors vs the Union of India, 2012).

The Bangladeshi immigrants possess serious challenges to the local natives in all aspects, in other words, they act as competitors for space: land, water, services and jobs. Thus, their presence is seen as a potential threat to the demographic and political profile of the region. The natives also allege that the avenues for gainful employment among low-skilled Indian are shrinking due to continued influx of low-skilled workers from across the border, contributing to the unemployment of the natives. Furthermore, illegal immigrants do have negative implications for states seeking to provide adequate education, health, and housing (Singh, 2009). Thus, in this way the influx of the illegal immigrants negatively impacts the development of the nation.

Tendulkar Committee, in their Report provided the poverty rate of India as whole and other states individually. The present researchers attempted to link it up with the population growth of India and Assam.

**Chart 1**

Population of India and Assam (2001-2011) Census Report of India			Poverty rate of India and Assam (2004-2011) Tendulkar Committee Report		
Year	India (in Lakhs)	Assam (in Lakhs)	Year	India (in %)	Assam (in %)
2001	10270	266	2004-2005	37.2	34.4
2011	12102	312	2011-2012	21.9	32
Increment (in %)	17.83	17.29	Decrease	15.3	2.4

**Source:** Researchers own computation from Census Report (2001-2011) of India and Assam along with the Report of Tendulkar Committee on poverty in India and Assam.

Here, left portion of the Chart shows the decadal growth of population of India and Assam. Both the data are in incremental way. In terms of India as a whole, with the increment of population in 2001 and 2011 are 10270 and 12102 lakhs respectively. In Assam, population increases from 266 lakhs to 312 lakhs from 2001 to 2011. In both the cases the increment of population is in similar direction with 17.83% in India and 17.29% in Assam. In terms of poverty, according to the Tendulkar Committee Report, the picture is completely different. India observed reduced rate of poverty from 37.2% in 2004-2005 to 21.9% in 2011- 2012 with a total decrease of 15.3%. Assam witnessed an exception with very lesser number of decreases in terms of poverty from 34.4% in 2004-2005 to 32 % in 2011-2012. Thus, only 2.4% of reduction in terms of poverty is witnessed in Assam. Reserve Bank of India, Annual Report of 2012 shows Assam's total poverty as 31.98%; rural poverty counts to 33.89% whereas urban estimates to 30.49%.

The real development of a nation begins from the rural areas and if the immigrants continue to occupy the lands by their settlements it can create challenges for the natives for their development. Illegal immigration not only create obstacles in the demography of the state or in socio-economic aspects of development of the state, but also creates tensions and conflicts in the ethnic, communal and religious harmony within the state and among the natives and immigrants too. Apart from all those this illegal immigration also paves the way for cross border terrorism, which can cause serious threats to the National Security.

### **POVERTY, IMMIGRATION AND NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS (NRC) IN ASSAM**

Poverty, immigration and NRC are the three different dynamics which the present researchers have tried to build up certain linkages among them. Poverty is a fearful situation where a person has to think about his/her daily livelihood. It is an inescapable situation. Immigration is the illegal flow of people from one geographical territory to another. Many people have migrated to neighboring countries to earn livelihood, mostly in Assam and Tripura (Shamsuddoha et al, 2009). NRC is the citizenship registration document that has been conducted in Assam and published a list on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019, leaving behind the plight of 1.9 million people out of it. In Assam, an illegal immigrant is the one who came to India after 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 and they are subject to be deported. People who came to India in between 1966 and 1971 would get the citizenship status after completion of 10 years of residence in Assam. Those who have migrated to Assam before 1966 would automatically be regarded as the citizen of India. As Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 came in to force; therefore, it was expected to reduce the statistics of immigrants as minorities (Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist and Christian) from three neighboring countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan would get the citizenship status of India. In order to prove the inter linkage between poverty and immigration with reference to citizenship determination process, we have studied and analyzed the Amnesty International India's Report titled "Designed to Exclude". The Report specifies certain cases of persons who are being excluded from the citizenship determination process along with the faults of Acts and Amendments.

Samina Bibi, in 2016 was being accused of being foreigner coming to India after 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1971. She was asked by the Foreigners Tribunals to specify certain documents in support of her Indian native. She produced 10 documents including her Father's name in the 1951 NRC, voter list of 1966, 2015 and 2018. But all the documents got nullified by the authority due to authenticity. Interestingly and ironically the voter list of 1966 was being rejected as she could not remember the Lok Sabha constituency of her grandfather. Illiterate Samina, after hearing that she would be sent back to Bangladesh stopped eating and as a result, she had to be admitted in the hospital. Her husband told the Amnesty International India that this situation led them to marginalization.

Safina, another woman was declared a foreigner by the quasi-judicial Foreigners Tribunals illegally migrate to India after 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1971. She was scared of taking her to the detention center. Safina was also illiterate like Samina. She submitted voter list of 1966 and 1970 with her parents' name as the legacy data along with Gaon Panchayat written document. But everything was rejected. She also produced her brother's land document in the Morigaon district to link the legacy data. But, in the end, the authority declared her to be a foreigner and altogether asked her to proceed to the Gauhati High Court. Rupees 1,50,000 had already been spent on fighting her case in the Foreigners Tribunals and the Gauhati High Court, for which they had to sell their cattle and put their agricultural land on lease. This is not the only thing they lost; moreover, her son became traumatized after hearing her mother's news and became sick. Initially, he was the only bread winner of their household. But now, Safina and her family are of nowhere living in extreme poverty and marginalized.

Kismat Ali and Ashraf Ali were declared foreigner based on "ex-parte" judgments. They had no other option but to hire a lawyer to run their case. Kismat paid 70,000 to the lawyer and Ashraf had to pay 2,00,000 rupees to the lawyer and for that purpose his wife had to sell all the ornaments and had to take a loan. After 15 months they got justice, within that period they were kept in the detention center without any wage for them. This had worsened their condition as a human being.

The above-mentioned cases are just a few examples to link up immigration, poverty and NRC in Assam. Lives of immigrants are pitiable, whether they are suspected by the authority or the actual immigrants. They live their life in extreme poverty and in a fearful situation. Immigrants, as they are not the citizens of this country don't get the chance to engage in the government processes along with the decision-making and policy-making processes. Their relative position was very derogatory; only 7.3% of the immigrant's household have flush toilet, 9.3% make use of clean fuel for cooking and 13.4% have brick houses. They are living, if not surviving, in a worst-off condition from all the aspects, in a state of 'massive in-accessibilities' (Saikia et al., 2016). The registrations of birth, in terms of immigrants, are higher because they have a fear of losing their citizenship status and try to

ascertain their legitimacy in the existing place of habitation. The concept of family planning is very low among the women of immigrants as they lack educational facility. It has been an exceedingly politicized issue in Assam's political landscape in past several decades (ibid). Here, political parties have been trying to make the issue of immigration as vibrant agenda of political gain since decades.

Unlike United States, India doesn't have proper records of immigrants. In the US, policies are formulated keeping in mind all the circumstances present in a tangible way. When it comes to India, particularly the state of Assam, we need to analyze the language distribution and religion wise distribution with reference to population growth in Assam.

**Chart 2: LANGUAGE CENSUS OF INDIA 1971-2011**

YEAR	ASSAMESE SPEAKER (INCLUSIVE OF BODO LANGUAGE)	BENGALI SPEAKER	OTHERS
1971	70.1%	19.7%	10.2%
1981*			
1991	69.4%	21.7%	9%
2001	60.8%	27.5%	11.8%
2011	52.9%	28.9%	18.2%

\*1981 Census in Assam could not be conducted due to crisis situation of Assam

**Source:** Language Census of India 1971-2011

Chart 2 shows the changing trends of language speakers in Assam. Here, "Assamese" signifies tea garden languages, local tribal languages along with 'axomiya' language. Other includes Nepali, Hindi and other Indian languages. The Assamese speakers have decreased from 70.1% in 1971 to 52.9% in 2011 including the Bodo language. Bengali speakers have amplified from 19.7% in 1971 to 28.9% in 2011, other language speakers being 10.2% in 1971 to 18.2% in 2001. Henceforth, in Assam, the Assamese speakers are getting reduced in a significant way, whereas gradual increment is seen in Bengali and other language speakers.

**Chart 3 POPULATION SHARED BY RELIGION IN ASSAM: 1961-2011**

YEAR	HINDUS	MUSLIMS	CHRISTIANS	OTHERS
1971	72.51	24.57	2.60	0.32
1991	67.14	28.44	3.32	1.11
2001	64.89	30.92	3.70	0.49
2011	61.49	34.23	3.74	0.41

**Source:** Saikia et al.

Though Constitutionally India is a Secular State, yet it is a Hindu majority country since Independence. Assam, the 'gateway' of North East India is also a Hindu majority region. In Assam, since Independence of this county we have seen a changing nature of its religion pattern. As Chart 3 shows that, since 1971 to 2011, there is a decrease of Hindu population from 72.51% to 61.49% respectively. Muslims, on the other hand, in an incremental way in 1971 the Muslim religion was constitutive of 24.57% whereas, in 2011, it shows 34.23%. Christians and others are in a marginal line. The reason behind reduced level of Hindu religion is that people follow the birth control system, whereas in the Muslim religion, there is no such concept of birth or population control. In some districts of Assam, the Muslim religion is increased in a significant way. It can be the attributive of the illegal migration that Assam has been bearing since Independence. The government of India, therefore, should keep a proper record of its immigrants like the United States. There, they utilize the labor power of immigrants in a productive way, helping in country's Growth Domestic Product (GDP).

### ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

Poverty is neither a static term nor its usage is motionless. It is a situation that nobody wants to carry on in his/her life. Poverty by immigration is quite common to those countries, where there is an illegal flow of people. No Census Reports, conducted in India deals with the immigrants as a separate entity. It may be because of India doesn't have a refugee law and it works under the Standard Operative Procedure of 2014. It is very difficult to find out who is an

immigrant, due to proximity of language and culture with the native people. Along the line, it is also noteworthy that there is a lack of reliable data and statistics on the number of illegal migrants, various officials "guesstimates" the presence of 15-20 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh since 1971 (Nandy, 2005). At present, there are 6 Detention Centers in Assam in several parts namely Tezpur (797 people), Jorhat (670 people), Silchar (479 people), Dibrugarh (680 people), Kokrajhar (355 people), Goalpara (370

people) but no such NRC Detention Camp is in functional state (The New Indian Express, 17 March, 2020). These Detention Centers are overpopulated with respect to its seat capacity. Detention Centers are located within the Jail of Each district mentioned here. Inmates of the Detention Centers are not allowed to work and as a result they don't get paid. In Assam, Detention Centers are functional with the guideline of Assam Jail Manual, but despite that, people are not allowed for wage labor.

Immigrants' poverty is critically linked with the ratio of national poverty (Cancian et al., 2009). In Assam, 90% of immigrants are recorded from Bangladesh or erstwhile East Pakistan (Saikia et al, 2016). Those immigrants have been "pushed" by extreme poverty in their native land and thus, had no other way to earn their food than to settle in a better prospect zone. With cultural and linguistic proximity, they come and settle in Assam. In 2006, every sixth individual in Assam is founded to be an immigrant who entered in Assam post partition in 1947 or their descendants (ibid). Globally, studies found out that most of the immigrants are poverty ridden, in terms of livelihood, education and healthcare. One crucial factor is population growth among them. There is no birth control concept for them. Immigrants give birth to more than two children. In Assam, 44% immigrant women have less than two children (ibid). Thus, population is increasing without education facilities. This further, depreciates the process. Immigrants also affect the national poverty of the indigenous people. Immigrants drive down the wages of natives with similar skills. The capitalist mode of production always favors the high growth in terms of production, lowering the wages of the labor. In that case, indigenous workers got affected; along with immigrants don't get the adequate "surplus value" in terms of their productive labor.

The immigration problem in Assam is as old as civilization. As strange initiative doesn't solve a complex problem, therefore India needs to adapt proper strategies and policies to regulate the cross-border migration and keep a check on the illegal immigration which creates imbalance in the smooth functioning and development of the state.

The deportation of the illegal immigrants who are already staying in the detention camps since decades is an impossible one. Also, yearly huge sum of money is needed to invest on their food and other essential commodities along with accommodation. Furthermore, there are no such monitoring agencies, or any separate department of the Government to deal with the plight of those people. Those detained persons neither get the citizenship status of either of

the nations, nor can they enjoy the benefits which the native citizens enjoy such as healthcare and education. Life for them is always within those boundaries of the camps. Moreover, due to their non engagement in the productive works, they cannot contribute in the development of the nation. Also, due to the flexibility of the security measures, most of the illegal immigrants are often found engaging in crimes like thief, rape, robbery, etc. In order to reduce the illegal influx of people for better rural development the researchers have provided certain suggestions to the state mechanism. They are:

- Strengthening the border fencings and have proper surveillance by the border guards.
- Introduction of temporary work permits for the immigrants.
- Local authority and administration should be more alert and stricter.
- More research work should be done on the area and proper data on immigrants should be collected.
- Separate vigilant groups or Government departments should be created for looking at the issues of the illegal immigrants and those who are keep in the detention camps.

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