

## The Figure of the Migrant in Electoral Times: A Case study of Assam Assembly Elections 2021

In a way, giving an institutional approval to many forms of future politics in the region, Hiren Gohain, in 1983 declared that “National Left” had failed to understand the complexities of the “national question” in Assam. He argued that, “nationalist forces are more powerful than the class forces” in Assam. I will not comment on his position, nor do I want to invoke the theoretical debates that have centered around this class-community question for the last two decades. But I am merely trying to emphasize Dr Gohain’s new found understanding in the lowest year of the Assam movement as a critical shift and its crucial significance for the intellectual politics in the region for many years to come. I, somewhat with a quasi-activist and quasi-publicist syndrome, wandered around different parts of Assam during the assembly election of 2021 looking for visible or invisible figure of migrants in the overall election arithmetic and I realized that the so called national question is no longer national anymore in Assam. Its harsh political history no longer thrives in opposition to centrist patronization of the Indian mainlanders but paradoxically now it comfortably sits and enjoys its position in the vicinity of the utopia that we all call Indian nation-state. That is why, as I tried to emphasize in the report, Dr Gohain’s recent articulation on so called indigenous migrant workers and BJP’s discourse of indigenous ‘*atmanirbharata*’ (self-sufficiency) is deeply commensurable in the assembly election in the wake of a pandemic time!

Of course, the ideas and arguments of the report are very provisional, tentative and hurriedly flagged out. It has majorly stressed upon the so called indigenous migrant labourers but not so much on the so called non-indigenous migrant workers of the region: the more oppressed, the more displaced, peripheral communities of the Brahmaputra valley. One reason, along with my own limitation as a researcher in the field, could be that most of them, particularly the Miya community in the valley is at crossroads and its emerging middle class’s psyche is so visible in the popular that a mediation with its migrant labourer could not have been possible. The land-eviction drives under the BJP government and the all pervasive polarized environment of contemporary Assam- under such a climate, even a fleeting visibility of migrant labourers from these peripheral communities would not be possible. As if, it was a subaltern studies moment, when most of its young historians realized that Indian middle class also has a subaltern past! Anyway, migrants no longer exist as

migrants, once they arrive home, simply because there is a lack of a signifier that would signify them as migrants. However, the pandemic has changed it all. At least, in upper Assam, the Assamese sub-national anxiety of productive labour and lazy native discourse has been manifested through a new alignment of BJP's *atmanirbharata*. The significance of BJP's so called developmental politics in the first phase of the Assam assembly election in upper Assam could be understood through it. So is the near the proximity of the service sector migrant workers of so called indigenous origin in that developmental politics.

The identity of a migrant is very contextual, so is the idea of illegality. Their operative maneuver sometimes strategically helps in a wider context of election politics as I have tried to argue through BTAD or BTR areas of western Assam. However, in small scale, very local discourses, I have shown a very complex politics of negotiation which sometimes helps or disrupts the agendas of creating reality in an election time. The figure of migrants whether it's a migrant labour or otherwise, they are fleeting, stay in the slippage of the political discourses, I tried somewhat a symptomatic reading to produce an abstraction. I hope there will be a good discussion today which will help me further to narrate this critical political story more seriously and authentically.