

Environmental Migration and the Dynamics of Labor Market: Narratives from the Bank of River Brahmaputra in Post-Colonial Assam.

Author affiliation

Name: Nabajyoti Deka

Organization: PhD Student, IIT Kharagpur

Contact : u.nabadeka@gmail.com , +91-9885202549

Abstract

Human migration has always been responsible for reshaping the socio-cultural, political and most importantly, economic landscape of a region. In the recent past, it is the changes on the economic front brought by immigration that has become a major concern worldwide. Immigration often lead to restructuring of the labor market and economic opportunities in a region. The Brahmaputra valley, particularly the state of Assam, has been experiencing a similar situation due to large scale migration from within and outside the state. The immigration process into the region may be attributed to several reasons including natural calamities like flood, soil erosion etc. This paper is an attempt to understand the influence of manpower migration – *particularly, induced by climatic changes-* in reshaping the labor market in the towns and cities of Assam. The study will consider past events and secondary data sources to explore the possible connection(s) for environment-led movement of human capital and its repercussions. As economic activities – *measured in terms of productivity-* are a function of labor and capital, this study will emphasize the need for contextual understanding of the phenomenon of migration as a contributor (or disruptor) to the economic activities in the state, and to the overall socio-economic development of the region.

Introduction

The discourse on environment induced migration is not new in the public domain. There are numerous examples for movement of people induced by environmental changes in the annals of

'migration'. However, there is no substantial evidence to establish the quantum of human movement that is specifically caused by climatic changes. This type of migration *-internal or external-* results into restructuring the supply and demand of manpower, and often leads to reshaping the socio-economic landscape of a region. One such example would be the towns and cities located along the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam which are witnessing a noticeable transformation in the socio-economic front. People have migrated to the region for various reasons including employment opportunities, trade and commerce, marriages, natural calamities etc. Although the river valley has seen migrants from different geographical regions since time unknown, it is the post-colonial period which has seen widespread movement of people across the valley, particularly to the relatively bigger towns and cities. The growing urban centers have encouraged outsiders as well as the natives from rural locations to migrate to the towns for better opportunities.

The river Brahmaputra has always remained an integral part of the economy in the region *-for both trade and agricultural purposes.* The natives settled along the fertile plains of the river and involved in various agricultural activities. High crop productivity has been a significant factor influencing demographics of the valley, a part of which can be accounted to large scale migration of people in search of cultivable land. Historically, the British's were responsible for bringing large number of immigrants from the central part of India to the valley as manpower for construction of roads, bridges, railways, tea plantation, poppy cultivation, coal mining, oil and gas, timber etc. As commercial centers and towns got established along the river side, movement of people from hinterlands to this new centers of trade & commerce in the post-colonial era has become a frequent phenomenon. But the recent events of devastating floods - *which many environmentalists argue as repercussions of climatic changes-* gives a different impetus to the human movement from rural to relatively urban locations. Large scale immigration of people from across the border, a part of which may be attributed to climatic changes in Bangladesh, has already remained a major social, political and economic reason to worry for Assam and other nearby states.

Several towns including the urban region around Guwahati has already witnessed a surge in human capital. The increase in availability of manpower, though mostly unskilled and semi-skilled by nature, is already affecting the way economic activities happen in these urban centers.

The influence of migrant labors can be explained by its two major aspects i.e. the benefit to the local economy due to availability of cheap labor, and the continuous constrain being put on resources like land, water, infrastructure due to rapid population growth in the cities as result of migration. So, how will the changing demographics across the bank of the river Brahmaputra influence the 'Labor economics' of the region? Will the migration pattern –*a part of which can be accounted to climatic changes* - re-establish a new supply-demand equilibrium for the labor market?

There is very limited literature that explains what proportion of the total migrants are actually environmental migrants, and how these migrants are directly or indirectly influencing the labor market in the valley. It would be a difficult task to draw any substantial conclusion with regard to the influence of environmental-migrants in the local economy based on empirical evidence. However, there are certain studies and reports that do suggest the inevitable connection between natural calamities happening in Bangladesh, or soil erosion along the Brahmaputra in Assam, to the changing pattern of manpower availability, wage structure, and other aspects of the labor market. As the situation aggravates, it becomes imperative to understand the intricate relationship between human migration caused by climatic changes to that of changing labor pattern in the Brahmaputra valley. A closer observation of the past and present events is more likely to provide a better appraisal of the situation through different perspectives.

A historical perspective of migrant labors in the Brahmaputra valley

Like any other great river, the river Brahmaputra has also seen a perennial process of human movement and settlement along its bank since time unknown. The fertile valley of the river has attracted people from the nearby hilly regions, settlers from the Indo-Gangetic plains and from places as far as central and South-east Asia. Be it the Tibeto -Burmese migrants, the Tai-Ahom's or various tribes that settled along the Brahmaputra, the river had something to offer for everyone who came along. The highly productive land and abundant natural resources available in the region helped the communities to survive and flourish over centuries. Successive wave of migration has led to a highly diverse characteristics of the population in the valley, and greatly influenced in shaping the present cultural, socio-economic and political landscape of the region.

The British annexation of the Brahmaputra Valley after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 was a major point in the history of Migration in Assam. As the British expanded its territory in the

region, it established various industries and commercial activities of their interest like tea plantation, timber, railways, oil and gas etc. The huge shortage of labor encouraged migration from the highly populated adjacent territories of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), Bihar and Orissa. Initially, the migrants were absorbed as general labors in the administration or in plantations and other complementary services (Gopalakrishnan, 1986). Over the period of time, there was a continuous influx of people from outside, mostly to reap the economic benefits under the British rule. For instance, labor migration for tea estates was encouraged by the British and the immigrant population of the valley was a quarter of the total by 1901(Guha, 1977). What characterized the migration was that it acted as a catalyst for social, political and ecological transformation of the valley.

The large scale migration during the colonial period resulted into a more conspicuously categorizable human inhabitants i.e. the indigenous tribes and communities residing in the valley since centuries, and the non-indigenous communities from central India like Santhal and Oraon. The non-indigenous tribes were traditionally, and continued to be, employed as labor in tea estates, and hence derived their name as 'tea tribes'(Shrivastava & Heinen, 2005). As the tea industry expanded, a well organized system of labor recruitment from various parts of India was in place by mid 19th century which resulted into migration of other socially marginalized groups - *mostly lower caste Hindus* –to work in the tea industry(Xaxa, 1985). There were also cases of internal migration within the region as a result of the growing tea plantation in colonial Assam. As (Nath,1999) mentioned, the tribal population of Darrang district, a region along the Brahmaputra in lower Assam, migrated to the tea districts in Upper Assam which led to a demographic redistribution in the valley.

The migration of labor was not only restricted to the tea industry in colonial Assam. Like the plantation sector, the non-plantation sector like coal mining, railways , oil and gas etc. also employed migrant workers in large scale. The coal mining and oil industry in upper Assam invited labor force from places like Nepal, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh during the British rule (Sen,2009;Baruah,2014). The changing economic scenario encouraged people from different occupation and commercial interest to gain from the industrialization of British Assam in the 19th and early 20th century. As (Sharma, 2011) mentioned in her book that British Rule in Assam provided commercial opportunities for inflow of diverse groups from other regions. The

Rajasthani traders (Marwari's), Nepali Graziers, East Bengali Muslim peasants, and Bengali clerks, came and settled in Assam.

Pattern of migration in the post-colonial era

The Migration story from the Brahmaputra valley till the British rule was more about the availability of resources and better opportunities in the region. There is no reliable written record, though there might have been several situations in the past, when the movement of people was driven by natural calamities like flood, earthquake or other environmental factors. Although the ultimate goal of migration is to achieve better living and security, the motives and reasons that drives movement of people from one region to another may vary from situation to situation. Considering the scope and limitations of this review work, it is very important to understand how the migration story shaped up after independence, particularly after the geo-political boundaries of the region was clearly defined. Did the rate and scale of migration reduce once the British left the region as one might assume that the predominant factor for the large scale immigration was the policy of the British administration? Or, are there different dimensions to the story as it unfolds in the post-colonial Assam?

The effect of migration to Assam was highest after independence. People moved into and out of the region as a result of changing political and socio-cultural atmosphere immediately after independence (Bhuyan, 2006). The rate of migration may be divided broadly into two parts, pre-1971 and post 1971. Post 1971 refers to the trend of migration after the creation of Bangladesh. Large scale migration did take place between 1951 and 1971 in the entire region (Gohain, et al., 2013). The pattern of migration has undergone changes in the post 1971 period due to creation of Bangladesh. Several study reports reveal large scale illegal migration from Bangladesh in this period. However, there is no correct estimation of the number of immigrants, and what proportion of them can be accounted for environmental reasons.

Another remarkable point was when the capital of Assam was shifted from Shillong to Dispur, Guwahati in 1972. Trade and commerce began to grow once again in the region with Kamrup district becoming the center of major economic activities in the Valley. With passage of time, the existing industries grew manifold and several new industries have been established. Process of urbanization has also spread to other locations like Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur, Jorhat and other towns along the river. The shortage of labor force in the primary and secondary sector of

economic activity generates employment opportunities which attracts large volume of migrants into Assam in the form of interstate and international migrants. Similarly, lack of skill of trade and commerce among the people of Assam attracts large number of traders. Study done by (Chowdhury , 2013) provides empirical evidence that Assam is significantly affected by intra-state and international migration , but not by inter-state. The same study also reveals that Assam is significantly influenced by immigration from Bangladesh and Nepal.

A summary of international migrants, inter-state migrants and internal migrants is mentioned in the following table 1, table 2 and table 3 respectively (Basumatary, 2014)

Table 1: Volume of Migration (International) in Assam, 1991-2001

Countries	1991		2001	
	No. of Migrants	Percentage of total migrants	No. of Migrants	Percentage of total migrants
Bangladesh	2,88,109	84.85	1,64,144	86.14
Nepal	22,433	6.61	17,896	9.39
Pakistan	15,110	4.45	7,097	3.72
Others	13,903	4.09	1,421	0.75
Assam	3,39,555	100	1,90,558	100

Table 2 : Volume of migrants from other states of India, 1919-2001

States	1991		2001	
	No. of Migrants	Percent of total migrants	No. of migrants	Percentage of total migrants
Bihar	1,94,864	36.31	1,72,825	33.50
West Bengal	94,548	17.62	99,034	19.19
Uttar Pradesh	54,557	10.17	50,142	9.72
Tripura	37,101	6.91	33,504	6.49
Meghalaya	31,749	5.92	30,478	5.91
Rajasthan	29,599	5.52	28,118	5.45

Others	94,161	17.55	1,01,823	19.74
Assam	5,36,579	100	5,15,924	100

Assam has been experiencing large scale migration of rural laborers from different states like Bihar, Odisha, West-Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and others. As one may observe across the state, Bihar is one of the highest supplier of interstate migrant labor to Assam. The migration of rural labors of Bihar is both of permanent as well as seasonal in nature. The seasonal migration of Bihari labors is mostly categorized as weavers, brick lining workers, rice godown workers, while permanent migration includes workers who get regular work throughout the year (Narain, 2012). These workers which includes washer man, shoemakers, hawkers, rickshaw pullers etc. earn a reasonable income.

Table 3 : Volume of internal migration for top ten districts of Assam, 1991-2001

Districts	1991	2001
	Total internal migrants	Total internal migrants
Bongaigaon	87101	82691
Nalbari	73962	64043
Kamrup	209532	284460
Darrang	75872	67326
Sonitpur	102538	119601
Dhemaji	97579	77813
Nagaon	70530	80744
Golaghaat	72242	65835
Dibrugarh	70880	72614
Tinsukia	76143	80795

It is clear from the above table that Kamrup district has witnessed the highest influx of internal immigrants in Assam for the mentioned period. The key reason for such relatively higher rate of internal migration into Kamrup as compared to other districts is the rapid urbanization of

Guwahati . The city has scaled up across its length and breadth in the last couple of decades and is expected to grow further at a much faster rate. Thousands migrate to the urban spaces of Guwahati to make a living out of the opportunities created by the process of urbanization. Some of the other towns like Sonitpur, Nagaon, Tinsukia etc. also witness a relatively higher influx of migrants.

While knowing the pattern of migration is important to understand the phenomenon of migration happening in a region, it is equally important to find the reasons for which people make decision to migrate. For the same purpose, a list of reasons for migration was introduced for the first time in the census of India in 1981. The list of reasons continued except that the reason ‘natural calamities’ was dropped from the list in 2001. Considering the case of the Brahmaputra Valley, in the state of Assam, the migrants cited various socio-economic factors such as employment, business, education, marriage, natural calamities, family movement etc. for their decision to migrate within and into the state. A summarized information of within-the-state and into-the-state migration with reasons are mentioned in table 4

Table 4: Percentage of migrant population indicating the reasons for migration by various types for the period of 1991(Source: - Migration in Assam: Magnitude and types)

Reasons for migration	Intra-district flows		Inter-district flows		Inter-state flows	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Employment	9.9	0.9	22.3	1.9	24.3	3.3
Business	4.1	0.3	7.5	0.4	26.7	1.7
Education	3.0	0.8	4.3	1.4	2.7	1.5
Marriage	3.7	75.0	2.2	64.1	1.9	52.6
Family moved	42.1	13.2	33.1	20.8	23.1	29.9
Natural calamities	11.7	2.4	11.3	3.4	1.3	0.8
Others	25.5	7.4	19.3	8.0	20.0	10.2

It can be clearly observed from the table that a significant proportion of the total migrants had taken their decision to migrate due to natural calamities. While 'natural calamities' was an important contributing factor towards within-the-state migration, inter-state migration was not influenced much by natural calamities. It should be noted that there is a greater possibility of international migrants i.e. those immigrants from Bangladesh who temporarily settled in various locations of Assam like the *char* residents, also forms a part of the within-the-state migration volume. It will be extremely difficult to prove as in what proportion of international migrants (mostly Bangladeshis) migrate to the Brahmaputra Valley due to natural calamities. However, based on various literature, it can be assumed that a considerable number of Bangladeshis did migrate to Assam due to environmental reasons. Considering the above discussion, there are two broad perspectives through which the influence of environmental migrants in the labor market of Brahmaputra valley can be understood: – 1. International migrants, most of whom are also illegal immigrants and 2. Internally displaced migrants which includes both local residents and outsiders to the state.

International immigration and its influence in the labor market

Cross-border movement of people is due to number of interrelated factors: economic, environmental, religious and political. Among them, economic and environment factors have been the key drivers. Environmental factors often act as a triggering effect for the displacement and forced migration of the poor peasants to other regions, not limited to domestic destinations. Bangladesh is one of the most populous country with more than 150 million people and very high population density. A large section of the population lives in poverty. Further, the country is highly prone to natural calamities such as floods, cyclone, drought, riverbank erosion and landslides. This act as push factors for migration of Bangladeshis across the border states. Increasing pressure upon land and water resources in rural areas, caused by rapid population growth, and environmental degradation coupled with unequal resource distribution has produced widespread landlessness and unemployment. This catastrophic situation force the poor and landless tenant peasants to migrate to other areas, adjacent to Bangladesh like nearby Assam and the border districts of West Bengal. The affected people who are unable to satisfy their needs in an economically less developed Bangladesh, are increasingly moving to India where prospects of

life appear better (Sarfraz, 2003). Hence, Bangladesh becomes a major source of labor, but mainly of low skilled and unskilled workers (Singh, 2009)

It should be noted that majority of the migrants from Bangladesh are illiterate. Initially they worked in the *Char* areas of the lower Assam districts as cultivators. Gradually they infiltrated to the urban and semi urban areas in search of job, mostly as daily wage laborer's. *Char is an area of Brahmaputra and its tributaries in the state of Assam constituted of flood plain sediments.* Bangladeshis residing in the *Char* areas moved across the state over the period of time. Gradually, they integrated with the mainland population and became a part of agricultural workforce, and also of the informal labor market in the valley.

The Assamese people initially welcomed the immigrants who posed no problem to the local language and culture. The immigrants were commonly known as *na assamiya*. They boosted up the economy of the region. They cleared the forest and reclaimed vast fallow and unexplored areas, converting into productive lands. The localities saw before their eyes that the cash crops like jute could be grown successfully and the same field can be used to yield more than one crop (Barpujari, 1998). (Nair, 1961) described the hard work and increased agricultural productivity in lands owned by immigrant Muslims, particularly those originated from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. She further explains that the labors will grow vegetables and take them to the market in a basket on his head or 'bhar' which a native could not do as he felt it was below his dignity.

As the number of immigrants increased manifold, the natives felt threatened. A large part of the land was lost to the immigrants which held potential for future development. The immigrants from different regions and linguistic groups competed in the job market and were benefited from the economy of the state (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2014). Prospects for better employment and the dislike of the locals for manual labor have significantly contributed to the influx of the immigrants, in both rural and urban spaces. Immigrants easily find jobs in agricultural lands, in homes or as rickshaw pullers and manual labors. Consequently, unemployment rate among unskilled and semi-skilled natives have gone up.

Interestingly, the immigrants bring in both beneficial effects and challenges to the region. The immigrants have contributed to the rise of agricultural productivity by introducing better techniques, crop diversity and multiple cropping (Madhab, 2006). They contributed to rise in

productivity of agriculture in Assam (Goswami, 2007). Supply of cheap labors in the market has benefited both the producers and consumers. The immigrants do not seek employment in the formal labor market as they are not educated. However, they put immense pressure on land and resources, leading to socio-political and environmental problems which has adverse effects on the economy.

Many criticize the role of local contractors and business men who are responsible for encouraging employment of immigrants. The businessmen and contractors counter argue that native workers are not readily available whereas immigrant workers are easily available. Also, the immigrant labors can be hired at a cheaper rate as compared to native workers. One of the key concerns with regard to immigration is its cost and benefit to the receiving economy. There are numerous examples when immigrants pose a direct threat to the labor market for the residents of a region. The way in which immigration will affect the labor market and its outcomes will depend upon the skill structure of immigrants with relative to the skill structure of the natives (Dustmann et al., 2008). However, immigration will lead to re-distribution of labor market factors, harming some and gains for others based on the relative skill mix. Nevertheless, it is the businessmen and industrialist who are going to be benefited the most, a situation so aptly explained by (Georges, 1999) which goes as follows –

“The advantages of illegal migration tend to be on employer’s side. In that the migrant’s illegal status vis-à-vis his residence or employment places him in a situation of marked dependence, rendering him more willing to accept a very low wage, often below the legal minimum, the employer might expect to benefit”

Internal displacement and its influence in the labor market

The river Brahmaputra, which originates in the Himalayas and flows through three different countries, inundate and erode the river banks and islands (*chars*) on which thousands survive through cultivation. The erosion of the bank and *char* areas force people to migrate to mainland areas in search of home and livelihood. Assam has been witnessing large scale internal displacement due to such environmental causes for ages. Immigration from *char* areas is a classic example for migration caused by natural causes. The inhabitants of *char* area are basically those people from Bangladesh who came before independence and are involved in

cultivation. The *char*-dwellers face many environmental challenges including soil erosion and heavy flood which force them to migrate to safer zones.

Internal displacement in Assam becomes a common phenomenon during the rainy season when flood begins to peak. Thousands of internally displaced people from the *chars* and river-bank areas are seen huddled in temporary shelters by the side of the highways or in the shacks and schoolhouses of the neighboring mainland villages. These *bustees* become the source of cheap and ready labor for Assam's towns and cities. According to published newspaper reports in 1991, the going daily wage rate for internally displaced people from the flood affected areas of Morigaon and Lahorighat in lower Assam was as little as Rs 5, whereas the average daily wage for others was Rs 30 (Dasgupta,2002). As the daily wage market gets saturated due to continuous in-migration, many of the internally displaced begin to move further towards upper Assam and to other states like Manipur and Nagaland.

Apart from the *Char* areas, Majuli, recognized as one of the largest river island which is located in the midst of river Brahmaputra, has been constantly affected by flood and erosion. The island is gradually shrinking due to continuous erosion. The population of the island was 1.68 lakh (Census,2011) with majority of the population belonging to tribal communities namely *Mising, Deori, and Sonowal Kacharis*. Erosion has been a major problem for the inhabitants as most of the population residing in the island are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, and hectares of land are eroded along with standing crops. The situation leads to forced migration of people from the island to nearby towns like Jorhat for alternative livelihood opportunities. A study performed by (Das,2015) reveals that the residents of Majuli considered migration as an alternative way of adaptation to increased floods. The people, mostly youths are migrating to other places within and outside the state in search of employment. They mostly work as security guards, rickshaw pullers contract workers etc. in urban locations. Consequently, the available workforce for agricultural activities in the island has been decreasing gradually.

Another interesting pattern to be noticed is the rural-urban migration in Assam. The towns and cities along the Brahmaputra likes of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Tezpur and Guwahati are expanding rapidly. There are several 'push' and 'pull' factors that leads to large scale migration of people from rural location to these urban centers. Growing urbanization, increased demand for labor in urban areas and increasing income differentials between urban and rural areas are some

of the 'pull' factors. While poor condition of agriculture, lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, natural calamities like flood in Assam are the push factors responsible for rural-urban migration. Given that most of the population of Assam (around 85%) lives in rural areas as per past census reports, the state also witnesses one of the highest rural to rural migration rate among all Indian states (Census ,2001).

Most of the migrants who hail from the rural areas are scattered, ill-informed and uneducated. They often become victims of poor labor practices in the bigger towns and cities. They are more likely to receive unfair wage and face fraudulence. It would not be surprising to observe that many of those migrant labors are often caught in a chain of contractors and middlemen and have little resources to take legal action for any dispute. Nevertheless, the rural migrants continue to move to urban spaces looking for a better living despite the poor working environment, and miserable living conditions. The burgeoning population growth in the urban spaces may be considered as a boon as it acts as source of workforce, particularly in the informal sector, for building infrastructure, industrial development and various economic activities. However, as mentioned earlier, it also leads to numerous problems such as overcrowding of the cities and towns, pressure on resources and infrastructure, shortage of housing, food and other basic amenities.

Conclusion

Migration into the Brahmaputra valley has deeply influenced the economic landscape of the region, particularly the towns and cities of Assam. Millions of people have come from outside the state to the region looking for better livelihood opportunities. There are also thousands of internal migrants who move from one place to another within the region looking for better living, mostly from rural to urban locations. Noticeably, a significant part of the human movement that has happened after independence can be directly or indirectly attributed to natural calamities like flood, soil erosion etc. Those immigrants have often been referred to as 'environmental migrants' in several text though there does not exist any standard definition as such. The immigrants to the valley can be broadly classified into two major categories i.e. the international immigrants mostly from neighboring Bangladesh, and the internal migrants who move from one place to another within the state.

The migrants have been responsible for restructuring the labor market of the region, particularly the agricultural sector and the informal labor market. The migrant labors have been responsible for changing the way labors are made available for various economic activities in the urban centers, and more importantly in restructuring the wage structure and other labor related issues. The changes brought by the immigrant labors have both positive and negative impact in the current socio-economic scenario of the state. The immigrants have made the labor market competitive, brought new skill-set, and directly contributed to development of agriculture and other industries. However, it has also threatened the natives by taking away several job opportunities, and put tremendous pressure on the resources like land, water, infrastructure etc. due to unnatural population growth. The number of Bangladeshis have already become a major political issue for Assam and nearby states. Nevertheless, it is certain that, whether these migrants get their due recognition as environmental migrants or not, their fate is no worse or better off than any other migrants.

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