

Environmental Migration and the Dynamics of Labor economics: Narratives from the Bank of River Brahmaputra in post-colonial Assam

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Abstract

The discourse on environment induced migration is not new in the public domain. Although there is not substantial evidence for climatic changes leading to movement of human capital from one region to another, there are numerous instances of human migration for climatic reasons in the annals of 'migration'. Such migration *-internal or external-* results into restructuring the supply and demand of manpower, which often results into reshaping the socio-economic landscape of the region. One such instance is the towns and cities located along the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam which are witnessing a noticeable transformation on the socio-economic front. Although the river valley has seen people migrating 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 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 Britishers 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 plantations, 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 these 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 movement of people from rural to relatively urban locations. Large scale immigration of people from across the border, a part of which may be accounted for climatic changes in Bangladesh, has already remained a major social, political and economic reason to worry for Assam, and India.

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. So, how will the changing demographics across the bank of the river Brahmaputra influence the 'Labor economics' of the region? Is the climatic-change-induced migration going to re-establish a new supply-demand equilibrium for the labor market? This paper is an attempt to understand the influence of manpower migration – *particularly induced by climatic uncertainties* - 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 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 particular, and to the overall socio-economic development.

Key words- movement, human capital, economic activities, labour market