

Sub-theme: Migrant Labour as the Key to Accumulation in Post-colonial Capitalism

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Rural Out-migration of Nepali people in Assam: A Case Study in Sonitpur District

The study is an attempt to understand the genesis of rural out-migration among the Nepali community of Assam to the big cities of the mainland India with special reference to the Sonitpur district. Historically Nepali community is a migrant community. They migrated in the colonial as well as in the post-colonial period in search of livelihood. Obviously, there were some pull factors which drew a large chunk of Nepali migrants to Assam. Now, the trend is reversing as large numbers of people are moving out of the state in search of livelihood. Therefore, the out-migration of this particular community has sociological significance in the present context.

Migration is the movement of people from one geographical location to another in a given period of time. Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines internal migration as population shifts which occur within nation states as labour migrates towards the growth poles in the economy (Scott and Marshall 2009:367). According to the Report of the National Commission on Rural Labour 1991, a migrant in India is a person who migrates temporarily from his place of residence to another area, either rural or urban, with a view to waged employment (Breman 2012:5). Migration has many economic, demographic and social dimensions in a given society and hence it has come to occupy an important place in demographic analysis as well as in policy making.

In the recent decades, India has witnessed a spurt of massive rural out-migration. According to 2001 Census, 315 million people in India are internal migrants based on the place of last residence, accounting for 31 percent of the total population of India. Projections indicate that internal migrants may increase in numbers to approximately 400 millions in Census 2011(Rajan 2013:7). India's urban population has already increased from about 286 million in 2001 to 377 million in 2011(Census of India 2011).

Indian economy is in transitional phase. The market-driven industrialization and urbanization along with retarded agrarian economy have catalyzed a mass exodus of rural population to the urban centres. Natural resource appropriation and land grab for industry and other development activities seem to be a major cause for migration of rural populace to the big cities. In the liberalization period, Indian economy has witnessed massive displacement of population for commissioning of big dams, special economic zones (SEZs), infrastructure projects, etc. These uprooted people usually flock to the cities as they have no option for livelihood. Karl Marx explains this process of eviction of peasantry from their land and livelihood with the concept of primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation is the process by which the producer is divorced for his/her means of production. Similarly, agriculture has not remained as a lucrative livelihood option as before. Journalist P.Sainath observes, “On average, that’s about 2,035 farmers losing ‘Main Cultivator’ status every single day for the last 20 years. And in a time of jobless growth, they’ve had few places to go beyond the lowest, menial ends of the service sector.” (The Hindu, 2013)

Utsa Patnaik (2011) in her article ‘*Agrarian distress*’ has lucidly describes the inevitability of the rural work force to move to the urban centres during the period of ‘primitive accumulation’. She describes how the eviction of rural work force from their land for industrial and development purpose has forced them to migrate to the urban areas in search of livelihood. Since most of these workers are unskilled or semi-skilled, they have got job only in the lower strata of the informal sector. Earlier notion was that the emulation of market driven growth model of western developed countries would eventually uplift the poor, marginalized people with the ‘trickle down’ effect of the market. But the situation in the advanced capitalist countries was completely different from today’s developing countries. The displaced peasants from agriculture emigrated to the colonized lands in the Americas, Africa and Australia. But in India the situation today is completely different. As commercial and residential activities and tourism are the only labour-absorbing and booming sector, they hardly find jobs elsewhere in the economy.

However, the World Bank, in a report has called for the encouragement of clustered economic growth, mobility of people and economic integration to lift rural people out of poverty. It says that the migration of population from rural to urban areas is natural and should be

encouraged. Government should provide improved education, health and other infrastructure facilities to prepare quality human resource, which can migrate to the economic hubs for employment. (Business Standard, 2009)

Historically, Assam has been a hub of in-migration. From ancient times, various groups and races had migrated from neighbouring countries to Assam in search of livelihood. In the past there were some pull factors of migration which drew a large number of migrants from neighbouring areas to the Northeast. They migrated in different periods of history to Assam and transformed the demography, society, economy and polity to large extent.

The society in Assam had witnessed massive floodgates of in-migration with the annexure of Assam in the British colonial empire. As part of the colonial revenue policy, the uprooted Muslim peasants from erstwhile East Bengal migrated to Assam and settled in the wasteland. Similarly, the tribals from Jharkhand migrated to work as a labour in the tea estates under the patronage of colonial rulers. Nevertheless, during colonial period the educated Bengali *baboos*, Nepali grazers, Marwari traders, etc migrated to Assam and participated in the economy. The Bengali *baboos* got secondary jobs in the British administration. The Nepali people were mainly engaged in commercial cultivation as well as in small diary business. The important thing is that this massive in-migration boosted the agrarian economy in Assam in the colonial period (Hussain 1993:45-47).

On the other hand, out-migration of people from northeast was relatively low as there was abundance of local resources and low population density of the region. Of late, a large number of people have migrated to the metropolis of the mainland India in search livelihood. This trend is very evident from the mass exodus of north eastern people from the big cities like Bangalore, Delhi during the ethnic violence in western Assam that erupted on July 2012.

The proposed study intends to examine the factors behind the out-migration of Nepali people in Assam and its various implications on economy, society and polity.

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