

# Migrants issue of North East: A Historical Perspective

February 5, 2019

## Manifest pedagogy

The issue of illegal immigrants of North East and the protests against legal measures to both legitimize (Citizenship Bill) and delegitimize (NRC) them is a major challenge in India polity. This triggers the issue of History of the migrants and the history of protest movements against them. This is a current inspired dimension of History and as many questions in history are being asked in this format Manifest pedagogy targets these areas.

## In News

- [The Citizenship \(Amendment\) Bill 2016](#) and protests against it
- National Citizen Registry

## Placing it in Syllabus

- Post-independence consolidation and reorganization within the country.
- Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism & secularism.
- Security challenges and their management in border areas

## Dimensions

- Immigration during Pre-British period
- Immigration during British rule
- Immigration during Partition
- Immigration Post Partition

- Immigration during Bangladesh liberation war of 1971
- Consequences of Immigration.
- Protest movements against immigration.
- Assam accord.
- Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016
- National Registry of Citizens

## **Immigration before British rule**

Northeast India has over 220 ethnic groups and the equal number of dialects in which Bodo form the largest indigenous ethnic group. The hills states in the region like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland are predominantly inhabited by tribal people with a degree of diversity even within the tribal groups. The region's population results from ancient and continuous flows of migrations from Tibet, Indo-Gangetic India, the Himalayas, present Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

The first group of migrants to settle in this part of the country is perhaps the Austro-Asiatic language speaking people who came here from South-East Asia a few millennia before Christ. The second group of migrants came to Assam from the north, north-east, and east. They are mostly the Tibeto-Burman language speaking people. From about the fifth century before Christ, there started a trickle of migration of the people speaking Indo-Aryan language from the Gangetic plain.

Almost all groups inhabiting the region have come from different places at different periods of history and most of the early settlers claim their origin from various places of East and Southeast Asia. Infact , the entire region can be called a 'museum of races'.

## **Immigration during British rule**

Most of the population groups in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated to the region from different parts of the Indian heartland. In the pre-British

era, major population vows were from east of the region, from Southwest China and Upper Burma. During and after the colonial rule, there was a large-scale influx of Bengali-speaking people, followed by Nepalese and the tribal people from central India. Most of the population groups in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated to the region from different parts of the Indian heartland. In the pre-British era, major population flows were from east of the region, from Southwest China and Upper Burma. During and after the colonial rule, there was a large-scale influx of Bengali-speaking people, followed by Nepalese and the tribal people from central India. Most of the population groups in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated to the region from different parts of the Indian heartland. In the pre-British era, major population vows were from east of the region, from Southwest China and Upper Burma.

During and after the colonial rule, there was a large-scale influx of Bengali-speaking people, followed by Nepalese and the tribal people from central India. Most of the population groups in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated to the region from different parts of the Indian heartland. In the pre-British era, major population flowows were from east of the region, from Southwest China and Upper Burma. During and after the colonial rule, there was a large-scale influx of Bengali-speaking people, followed by Nepalese and the tribal people from central India. Most of the population groups in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated to the region from different parts of the Indian heartland. In the pre-British era, major population flows were from east of the region, from Southwest China and Upper Burma. During and after the colonial rule, there was a large-scale influx of Bengali-speaking people, followed by Nepalese and the tribal people from central India.

The element of insularity and sense of marginalization is the fallout of colonial legacy. Expansion of British rule to the Northeastern part of India following the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 had led to the demarcation of the region for the first time on the basis of fixed and rigid territorial jurisdiction.

The introduction of Inner Line Regulation in 1873 and the declaration of most of the hill areas as "Excluded Areas" under the provision of Government of India Act of 1935, isolated the tribal communities from social, political and economic developments taking place elsewhere and further curbed the flexible and fluid social tribal settings that existed in the pre-colonial era, allowing inter-mingling of diverse streams of people.

In the pretext of local people's perceived inability to become the mainstay of its economic initiatives, several historians opine that the colonisers started importing tribal and backward caste Hindus from regions such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and other parts of British India to work as indentured labourers (Tea Plantations).

Further, to run the administration the British also brought with them officers, lawyers and clerks from Bengal, thus sowing the seeds of antagonism between the Ahom nobility and British bureaucracy represented at the grassroots by Bengali officials mostly from Sylhet, which was tagged to Assam after the latter was separated from the Bengal Presidency in 1874.

To feed the burgeoning population, the British also encouraged Muslim peasants from the erstwhile East Bengal to settle in the fallow and wasteland areas of Assam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

## **Immigration associated with partition**

In 1947, Bengal was partitioned into the Indian state of West Bengal and the Pakistani province of East Bengal. East Bengal

was later renamed East Pakistan. The majority of East Bengali refugees settled in the city of Kolkata (Calcutta) and various other towns and rural areas of West Bengal, but a significant number also moved to the Barak Valley of Assam and the princely state of Tripura which eventually joined India in 1949. Indian government estimates suggest around 2.6 million migrants leaving East Bengal for India and 0.7 million migrants coming to East Pakistan from India.

Unlike the case of Partition in Western India the partition in eastern India is a long drawn out one. There was no complete transfer of population as in Western India and there were no refugee properties to be occupied by the inbound migrants as in Punjab. The migrant population saw a continuous flow over the next decades with the rise of communal violence in East Pakistan.

## **1950s**

In 1950, it is estimated that a further one million refugees crossed into West Bengal, particularly in the aftermath of 1950 Barisal riots and Noakhali riots. The 1951 Census of India recorded that 27% of Kolkata's population was East Bengali refugees mainly Hindu Bengalis.

## **1960s**

Migration continued, primarily from East Pakistan to India, right up to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, both on an ongoing basis and with spikes during periods of particular communal unrest such as the 1964 East Pakistan riots and the 1965 India-Pakistan War, when it is estimated that 600,000 refugees left for India. Estimates of the number of refugees up to 1970 are over 5 million to West Bengal alone. This includes around 4.1 million coming between 1946 and 1958 and 1.2 million coming between 1959 and 1971.

## **1970s**

Another major influx into India came in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War, when Hindu refugees escaped systematic mass killings, rapes, lootings and arson. It is estimated that around 10 million East Bengali refugees entered India during the early months of the war, of whom 1.5 million may have stayed back after Bangladesh became independent. These refugees remain in India and became the citizens of India and never went back to independent Bangladesh due to economic, fear of insecurity for being a minority there.

### **Immigration of Tribal's of Bangladesh**

Along with Bengali Hindus, minority Chakmas and Hajongs too fled the erstwhile East Pakistan to take shelter in the Northeast during that period. The existence of Chakmas and Hajongs in their native place was further imperiled by the construction of the Kaptai dam on the river Karnaphuli in 1962. They entered India through what was then the Lushai Hills district of Assam (today's Mizoram). While some stayed back with the Chakmas who were already living in the Lushai Hills, the Indian government gave settlement to a majority of the refugees in the sparsely populated North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), present-day Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Immigration from Burma**

Again, the military coup of 1962 forced many Burmese Indians to flee the country and take shelter in the Northeast. Many of the descendants of the uprooted Tamil migrants are now settled in Moreh in Manipur. Significantly, in the decade following 1960, Manipur recorded marginal increase in the number of net in-migrants. Otherwise, the rate of migration in the state was never very high. Widespread and persistent ethnic, political, and religious persecution by the Burmese military regime subsequently compelled thousands from the Chin community to take refuge in neighbouring Mizoram. Most Chins came to Mizoram between 1988 and the mid 1990s.

## **Tibetian migrants**

The Tibetans were yet another group of people to cross over to the Northeast from a neighbouring country, fleeing persecution. They came when Dalai Lama fled China in 1959. Most of them settled in Arunachal Pradesh.

## **Inter-state migrants of India**

Besides, inter-state migration to Northeast from Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Odisha too was unabated in the first few decades since Independence. And unlike the colonial period, the post-partition migrants did not restrict themselves mainly to Tripura and the plains of Assam. They fanned out over the entire region.

Most of the population groups in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated to the region from different parts of the Indian heartland.

## **Social consequences of illegal migration**

- Crisis of identity: The influx of immigrants created a crisis of identity among the indigenous populations. Their cultural survival was in jeopardy, their political control was weakened and their employment opportunities were undermined by such illegal migration.
- Environmental degradation: Large areas of forest land were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation. The state of Assam experienced declining percent of land area under forest from 39% in 1951-52 to about 30% now.
- Difficult to identify the illegal migrants: Due to the similar language spoken by illegal migrants from Bangladesh and the indigenous Bengali speaking Muslim of Assam, it becomes difficult to identify and deport the illegal migration from North East.

## **Economic consequences**

- Increase financial burden: Immigration has increased pressure on the part of state government, as the government has to increase the expenditure on education and health facilities to the immigrants.
- Displacing native workers: There is a fear particularly during a recession that immigrants take jobs which would otherwise be taken by local people; in particular place and circumstances there can be competition and conflict.
- Decreases wage level with the increase of population: Illegal immigrants in every year have been adding a good number of people. It is one of the main reasons of population explosion. Due to this there is a possibility of decreasing wage level.

## **Political consequences**

- Illegal voters: Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants have got their names enlisted in the voting list illegally, thereby claiming themselves as citizens of the state. The immigrant's population act as a vote bank for the political parties in Assam.
- Issue of terrorism: Pakistan's ISI has been active in Bangladesh supporting militant movements in North East. It is alleged that among the illegal migrants there are also militants, who enter into India to carry out the terrorist activities.
- Movement against outsiders: The large scale migration into the northeast gave rise to a special kind of problem that pitted the 'local' communities against people who were seen as 'outsiders' or migrants. These latecomers, either from India or abroad, are seen as encroachers on scarce resources like land and potential competitors to employment opportunities and political power. This issue has taken political and sometimes violent form in many states of the northeast. The Assam movement from 1975 to 1985 is the best example of such

movement against 'outsiders'.

## **Assam: Protest movements against "Outsiders"**

The Assamese suspected that there were huge numbers of illegal Bengali Muslim settlers from Bangladesh. They felt that unless these foreign nationals are detected and deported they would reduce the indigenous Assamese into a minority.

There were other economic issues as well. There was widespread poverty and unemployment in Assam despite the existence of natural resources like oil, tea and coal. It was felt that these were drained out of the State without any commensurate benefit to the people.

In 1979, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) a student's group not affiliated to any party, led an anti-foreign movement against illegal migrants, domination of Bengalis and faulty voters registered that included lakhs of immigrants. The movement demanded that all outsiders who had entered the state after 1951 should be sent back.

The failure of government to respond the issue of illegal migration led to the agitation by the Assamese under the leadership of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and All Assam Student's Union (AASU). Assam witnessed governmental instability, sustained civil disobedience campaigns and worst cases of ethnic violence.

The agitation followed many new methods and mobilised all sections of Assamese people, drawing support across the state. It also involved many tragic and violent incidents leading of loss of property and human lives. The movement also tried to blockade the movement of trains and the supply of oil from Assam to refineries in Bihar.

Eventually after 6 years of turmoil, the Rajiv Gandhi-led government entered into negotiations with the AASU leaders, leading to the signing of an accord in 1985.

With the successful completion of this movement, the AASU and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad organized themselves into a regional political party called Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). It came to power in 1985 with the promise of resolving of foreign national problem as well as to build a 'Golden Assam'.

## **ULFA**

It has also been argued that there have been several contributing factors for the youth to join the cadres of ULFA such as unemployment, corruption in Government machinery, influx of illegal migrants, dominance of non-Assamese in the business sector, perception of exploitation of Assam's natural resources by the Centre and alleged human right violation by the Security Forces.

It became active from the 1980s and till the late 1990s, enjoyed considerable public support due to a perception that 'insurgency is causing secessions' from Assam and that if only the Assamese had launched a violent counter-agitation, the situation would have been different. The average Assamese also regarded the six years of largely non-violent agitation for 'expulsion of foreigners' as having achieved very little 'success'. With large scale criminalisation of ULFA cadres in the 1990s there was a rapid loss of public support particularly among the urban middle classes. Another factor for its decline was ULFA's known links with the 'agencies' of certain foreign countries with interest in subverting the distinctive culture of the State and in causing unrest in the country.

It also appears that repeated volte-face by ULFA during several abortive negotiations with the Government, affected its credibility. After the crackdown by the Bhutanese Army, ULFA has not recovered its past strength though the organisation tries to make its presence felt through kidnappings, bomb blasts and selective murder of migrant

workers.

## **Meghalaya**

The State is fortunately free from violence of the intensity that prevails in many other parts of the region. Except violence against 'outsiders' particularly the Bengali speaking linguistic minority. Emerging tensions about infiltration from Bangladesh particularly in the Garo Hills is a cause of concern.

## **Tripura**

The State's demographic profile was altered since 1947 when mass migrations from the newly emerged East Pakistan converted it from a largely tribal area to one with a majority of Bengali speaking plainsmen. Tribals were deprived of their agricultural lands at throw-away prices and driven to the forests. The resultant tensions caused major violence and widespread terror with the tribal dominated Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) emerging as one of the most violent extremist outfits in the North East.

Proximity to Mizoram exposed the State to the 'side effects' of that insurgency. However, effective decentralisation in the 'non-scheduled areas', bringing tribal areas within the purview of an autonomous 'Sixth Schedule' Council, successful land reforms and systematic promotion of agriculture have contributed to considerable conflict reduction. There is growing resentment among the tribals due to the restrictions on their 'freedom to use' the forests and their nominal participation in district development.

## **The Usage of Inner Line Permit to Stop Migration**

Inner Line Permit (ILP) is an official travel document issued by the Government of India to allow inward travel of an Indian citizen into a protected area for a limited period. It is obligatory for Indian citizens from outside those states to

obtain a permit for entering into the protected state. The document is an effort by the government to regulate movement to certain areas located near the international border of India.

Despite the fact that the ILP was originally created by the British to safeguard their commercial interests, it continues to be used in India, officially to protect tribal cultures in northeastern India. There are different kinds of ILP's, one for tourists and others for people who intend to stay for long-term periods, often for employment purposes.

The states which require the permit are:

- Arunachal Pradesh
- Mizoram
- Nagaland

Demands by the Government of Manipur for the introduction of the provision of an Inner Line Permit system to restrict entry of outsiders into the state were refused recently which lead to protests by Meitei's.

In this light of continuous migration from the various parts of India and Neighboring countries the demography of North East is continuously changing. In this context the paranoia of a demographic invasion and the realities of Vote bank politics is leading to numerous protests. The legal changes by the provisions of [The Citizenship \(Amendment\) Bill 2016](#) and the National Registry of Citizens is causing a new level of anxiety and fear both among the indigenous population and the migrants.