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**INDIA 'S NORTHEAST  
AND THE CRISIS OF  
MIGRATION**



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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Institute.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This Paper proposes to look at the issue of migration in a historic and contemporary perspective of land settlement and related political questions, pressure on natural resources from demographic and other factors and the question of sustainable development in the Northeast, but specifically in Assam. The problems posed by immigration into Assam are not unique: we see them repeated, with different sets of actors, in Meghalaya and Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. The faces of the actors differ but the core issues remain the same—and remain unresolved, with bitterness and violence growing by the day. This paper is not an academic survey but (gives the author's perception of existing realities and future trends) based on field experience and extensive interviewing and travelling in the region. Our discussion begins at a point earlier this century before moving to the present situation, reviewing the present social and political crisis and the need for conflict resolution and open debate.

More than fifty years ago, India's greatest statesman declared to the people of Assam: "If the people feel that the present policy of the Government on settlement and immigration is oppressive and anti-national, let them fight it non-violently, or violently, if necessary."<sup>1</sup>

Those prophetic words of Mahatma Gandhi, recorded by his faithful diarist, the late Pyarelal Nayar, continue to have a special meaning for the Assam Valley. For one thing, his remarks on the issue of immigration and settlement are not well known. The issue continues to trouble many parts of the Northeast, not just Assam.

For another, the apostle of non-violence was proclaiming a gospel of change that was radically different to the widely held perception of his views and principles: he was calling, as close to directly as was possible, even to armed revolt, if necessary, against an injustice.

It was not the only time that the Mahatma suggested trend to confrontation between Assam and the Centre, because he believed that individuals, communities, states and nations needed to stand up fearlessly—*abhaya* to him was as important as *ahimsa*, you could not and still cannot have one without the other—for what they believed.

The winter of 1946, as a tragedy of epic proportions—the Partition of India—was rapidly moving to its horrific conclusion, two emissaries of Gopinath Bardoloi, the Congress Premier of Assam, met the Mahatma at his camp in Noakhali, East Bengal.

The issue was simple: opposition to the Cabinet Mission's recommendation that India be grouped into three Sections, A, B and C. These were to include states as diverse as Bombay, the Northwest Province, Bengal and Assam, all of which had mixed religious populations.

The Mission clubbed Bengal, which was a Muslim-majority province, with Assam, a Hindu-dominated state. Since, under the Mission's dispensation, the Sections would frame the constitutions of these areas, a province with a numerical superiority like Bengal could force its views down Assam's throat.

Bardoloi's pleas against pushing Assam into Bengal's arms was dismissed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (that Assam's refusal could 'let loose the forces of chaos and civil war'); Sardar Patel first backed Bardoloi by writing to Sir Stafford Cripps, the President of the Board of Trade, that "the (British) interpretation means that Bengali Muslims would draw up the Constitution of Assam. Do you think such a monstrous proposition would be accepted by the Hindus of Assam?"<sup>2</sup> But then he too changed his position and took the Nehru line.

Bereft of support from the national leadership and worried by the Muslim League's open declaration that the Cabinet Mission's Plan meant that the "germ and essence of Pakistan" was there, Bardoloi turned to his last resort: the Congress Party of Assam and the Mahatma. The Congress Party was popular in Assam especially since the State had been a keen participant in the independence movement. And the Mahatma's support would be crucial to turn the tables against the Mission Plan and give the State Congress the support it needed. We must remember another significant point here: that Bardoloi and his Congress Party came to power in 1946 on the plank of Assamese nationalism and anti-immigrant policies.

The party manifesto states in no uncertain terms that "The inclusion of Bengali-speaking Syihet and Cachar (Plains portion) and the immigration or importation of lakhs of Bengali settlers on wastelands has been threatening to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam and has, in practice, caused many disorders in its administration."<sup>3</sup> It also said that the political boundaries of the state should be defined on the basis of Assamese language and culture for without it "the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible."<sup>4</sup>

The Congress won that election handsomely.

Bardoloi's emissaries were his trusted lieutenants, Bijoy Bhagawati and Mahendra Mohan Chowdhury. The Mahatma was unequivocal.

"If Assam keeps quiet, it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do. It must stand independently as an autonomous unit. It is autonomous to a large extent today. It must become fully independent and autonomous. Whether you have that courage, grit and the gumption, I do not know. You alone can say that....

"You will have to forget petty jealousies and rivalries and overcome your weaknesses. Assam has as many weaknesses as it has strength," for I know my Assam.

"We look to the Congress and then feel that if we do not follow it slavishly something will go wrong with it. I have said that not only a province but even an individual can rebel against the Congress and by doing so save it assuming he is on the right. I have done so myself...

"I have given you all this time to steel your hearts, to give you courage. If you do not act correctly and now, Assam will be finished. Tell Bardoloi I do not want Assam to lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else I will say that Assam had only manniken and no men. It is impertinent to suggest that Bengal should dominate Assam in any way."<sup>5</sup>

Backed by those ringing words, Bardoloi stood up to the pressure of the Congress High Command as well as of the British Government and the Muslim League.

The Mission's Plan fell apart.

Yet, fifty years later, the Congress is unwilling or unable to take a similar position because of fear of hurting its vote banks of its "secular" image. But why blame merely the Congress? Few parties, apart from the Asom Gana Parishad at the regional level and the Bharatiya Janata Party at the national level, are prepared to tackle this question head-on. Of course, one has very strong reservations about the exaggerated figures relating to the size of the migration from both these parties as well as their emphasis on "Muslim infiltrators" as against "Hindu refugees."

I find it difficult to accept such sweeping generalisations. An illegal immigrant is an illegal immigrant—the colour of the skin or the religious allegiance of that person is not a question unless he or she is being persecuted on religious grounds in the land of his/her birth.

For several years, I have advocated the need for an open debate on these issues. In this paper, I wish to indicate the framework of a constructive dialogue and debate on the questions of migration and development, with specific relation to the Northeast. Anti-settler feelings are not new in Assam or in any other part of the India Far East—what many of us loosely term as the Northeast. One can ask: North of what? (Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal!) East of where? (again Bangladesh!)

But before we get into the nuts and bolts of a discussion on migration and development, let us briefly examine the recent roots of alienation and conflict in Assam and the region.

First of all, it was a head count in 1979—not the census but an electoral check—that laid the basis for the fear in the Assam Valley that the indigenous people were being swamped by an unregulated influx of foreigners.

In this case, the "foreigner" was viewed as the Bangladeshi, invariably a Muslim and extremely hard-working as well as politically savvy: his vote was wooed by different political parties.

There has been a long-simmering dislike of the Mymensinghians or miyahs as the Bengali-speaking immigrant is called, especially among the Assamese caste Hindus and the plains tribals. This has found expression in many forms: confrontations and violence and more recently in the shape of a student-led, anti-migrant agitation that rocked the valley in the 1980s.

Tied to this attitude was the change in the Congress position, especially in the state but allied to the perception at the Centre, on immigration. Outsiders were gradually identified as supporters and then as vote banks.

As feelings on the issue built up, the death of Hiralal Patwari, the Janta Party Member of Parliament from the Mangaldoi constituency, in 1979, proved to be a turning point.

A revision of the electoral rolls turned up 70,000 complaints against so-called illegal immigrants. Forty-five thousand of these were upheld in a total electorate of 6000,000.<sup>6</sup> Across the state a flood of complaints swept the local electoral offices and in one particular week as many as 320,000 complaints were filed.

The All Assam Students Union, the traditional torch-bearer of agitations in the Assam Valley, allied with other organizations to launch a movement against settlers. The consequences of that agitation are still being felt: it threw the region into turbulence, created deep divides among the communities and led to conflicts and wounds that have not healed but are being opened again.

As the students articulated widespread concern and took advantage of popular resentment, the Chief Election Commissioner, S.L.Shakdher, made the following statement:

“In one state (Assam), the population in 1971 recorded an increase as high as 34.98 percent over the 1961 figures and this increase was attributed to the influx of a very large number of persons from neighbouring countries. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make, on the basis of the increase of 34.98 percent between the two censuses. The increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 percent over the 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when the state would have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may probably constitute a sizeable percentage, if not the majority of the population, of the state.

“Another disturbing factor in this regard is the demand made by the political parties for the inclusion in the electoral rolls of the names of such migrants who are not Indian citizens without even questioning and properly determining the citizenship status.”<sup>7</sup>

We are familiar with the events that followed the student agitation: first a series of strikes leading to the boycott of the 1980 elections and gheraoing of candidates that forced cancellation of balloting in 8 of 14 Parliamentary constituencies. Then followed a sustained campaign, despite crackdowns by police and paramilitary forces, that crippled the state administration and the economy.

Several rounds of negotiations between Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who was returned to power in the 1980 general elections, and the agitators failed. The Prime Minister called for an election to force the issue and settle the political instability in the state.

The 1983 February elections to the state assembly and to fill the vacant Lok Sabha seats were an unmitigated disaster. The students launched not just a boycott but active resistance. Roads and bridges were damaged; telecommunications were snapped; polling parties were attacked and at least one was killed.

I remember traveling extensively across the state and being stunned by the scale of strife and the siege mentality that prevailed among politicians, administrators and the police and paramilitary. The depth of hatred and violence that existed among different communities was also deeply troubling. The army was welcomed as a neutral force in

many places after riots had broken out and the civil administration and the police force had failed to quell them.

Riot after riot; massacre after massacre; community against community; neighbour against neighbour: The scale of the violence was frightening and tragic.

On the harvested rice fields of a little known village called Nellie, not less than 1,700 Muslim settlers were slaughtered in the space of a few hours by groups of plains dwellers, armed with primitive weapons, but who mapped their assault with military precision.

I personally witnessed the aftermath of that horror and the trauma of those days. It irretrievably shattered the social compact that Congress had built up over the years; it also brought to the surface the long-suppressed feelings of rage and frustration against the settler.

In most cases, it was the Bengali-speaking Muslim who bore the brunt of this wrath. In other places, it was the Bengali-speaking Hindu—again a migrant/settler from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh. And in one, there was a clash between Assamese villagers and members of the Bodo community, Assam's largest group of plains tribals in Gohpur, Upper Assam.

In case after case, the issue of discord was not merely religious differences or cultural problems but of disputes over land. This is a question to which we shall return in this paper, later and at greater length.

The election brought a Congress Party Government to power under Mr. Hiteswar Saikia, but is widely regarded as one of the most unfair elections to be held in the history of independent India. The death toll has not been matched by any election: the figures vary between 3,000 to 5,000 dead.

And the number of voters who participated was low: in some polling booths, not a single vote was cast.

The anti-foreigner movement turned slowly into an anti-Saikia agitation, as the agitation lost momentum, But it retained enough clout to enable its leadership to sign an agreement in August 1985 with the Central Government when Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, the new Prime Minister took the initiative. Under the terms of the accord, Mr. Saikia demitted office, the state legislature was dissolved and new elections were held that brought the agitators to power.

The Centre pledged to deport illegal immigrants who had after 1971, promised to set up a third oil refinery, reopen a sick paper mill, establish an Indian institute of Technology and a Central University in the state.

But on the core issues of identifying and deporting aliens, the agitators compromised: they sought the disenfranchisement of immigrants who had come between 1961-1971 (large number of them were Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan) but permitted them to vote in the very elections that brought them to power in 1985.

By agreeing to 1971 as the cutoff year, the agitators accepted the very formula that Mrs. Gandhi, astute as always on such issues, had offered as far back as 1980 and which they had spurned. In fact, at the time, Mrs. Gandhi had told the agitators that detection and deportation could begin on the basis of 1971 as a cutoff year while discussions continued on other issues. If the students had taken her offer, much time, energy and bloodshed could have been saved.

In 1985, the students came to power under the banner of a new regional party, the Asom Gana Parishad. But they failed to redeem their pledges of deportation and detection. Only about 900 illegal migrants were ousted during their tenure and they lost credibility. In the process, an armed insurrection grew in the state under the leadership of the United Liberation Front of Asom. Its activities were curbed by two major army operations that followed the dismissal of the Asom Gana Parishad Government and new elections that brought Congress and Mr. Saikia back to power. But in recent months, its activities have been on the upsurge, especially in collaboration with two other underground groups, the powerful National Socialist Council of Nagaland and the Bodo Security Force. But this essay is not the place to discuss insurgency.

What must be pointed out here is that a series of elections and confrontations has not resolved the crisis before Assam. In Fact, Assam- as well as other parts of the Northeast, some to a lesser degree and others to a similar if not greater degree – is facing an acuter problem than at other times in its past, pointing to a failure of institutions and leaders.

Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao recognized the legitimacy of the student grievances – much to the dismay of his party followers- at a public rally in Guwahati in 1992.

The Prime Minister surprised Assam that July by declaring, accounting to one newspaper account,<sup>8</sup> that the Centre was prepared to consider amending the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of Assam (IMDTA). But little has happened on that front.

Mr. Rao also said, according to this report, that “the demand made by the students of the State on the issue of illegal immigration of foreigners into the State was justified... such illegal migration of foreign nationals into Assam and their permanent residence here has created a serious problem in the state... He understood the deep-seated feeling of alienation and anger of the youth of Assam which he identified as having been born out of the influx of foreigners to the state.”<sup>9</sup>

This was a remarkable stand by the chief of the ruling party, in a state where the Congress is identified with establishing vote banks and tacitly if not overtly encouraging in-migration.

Surely, nearly four years after that statement, it is time to ask if the ruling party of any other party—barring the Bharatiya Janata Party—has a view on in-migration and foreign nationals settling in India? If there is recognition of the “anger” on the issue in Assam, then what has been done to assuage it?

Very little.

The flaws in the IMDTA remain untouched. It says that any complaint must be accompanied by the payment of a fee and the complainant must live within four kilometers of the person he/she is complaining against.

Villagers are loathe to put down money for such cases; they fear being drawn into tortuous litigation. In addition, many of the migrants live in tightly-knit, populous clusters. Concern about individual security is another reason for reluctance.

That no party is prepared to face the issue squarely is unfortunate because it gives the BJP a clear road on which to drive a narrow agenda that is neither based on fact or logic.

The BJP would have us discriminate between Muslim infiltrators and Hindu refugees. Let us repeat here: a foreign national is a foreign national. If there is political or religious persecution that has forced an individual's departure from the land of their birth, then he or she must prove it.

We must recall the Bardoloi manifesto of the 1946 election when, in his call to the Assamese people, Assam's Premier said that the "immigration or importation of lakhs of Bengali settlers on wastelands has been threatening to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam."<sup>10</sup>

Even earlier, in 1921, C.S. Mullen, the Census Commissioner of Assam remarked on the scale of the Bengali immigration: "Whither there is land, thither flock the Mymensinghians. In fact the way upon which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley in the past twenty five years."

## **STATISTICS**

To bring us up to date, it is important to reflect on the latest statistics which paint a grim picture of what is in store for Assam.

I must make it plain here that I am not a parochialist; nor do I support one community against another. In this case, as in all other cases, I am seeking to be objective. I am relying on data that is available to all. The interpretation is mine but the facts are difficult to dispute. They are, after all, the official records of the Census of India.

According to the Census of India, 1991, Assam's population grew from about 15 million in 1971 to 22.4 million in 1991.<sup>11</sup> There was no head count in 1981 because of the turbulence in the valley. Hindus were 15 million or 67.13 percent of the population.<sup>12</sup> Muslims were 6.3 million or just over 28 percent of the population.<sup>13</sup>

There may be nothing extraordinary in these figures just as there is nothing remarkable about the fact that the overall population growth rate in Assam since 1971 is 53.36% or a full percentage point less than the all-India figure.

But the picture looks different when one analyses the data from the districts.

In 1971, Assam had two Muslim majority districts: Hailakandi in the Barak Valley, which is dominated by Bengali speakers (incidentally, during all the trouble in the Assam agitation, the Barak Valley remained free of the agitation because the Bengali speakers saw their brethren as targets in the Brahmaputra Valley and Dhubri.

But in 1991, there were two more Muslim-majority districts: Barpeta and Goalpara. The percentage of Hindus and other non-Muslims in Barpeta dropped from 51.19 percent to 40.26 percent.<sup>14</sup> The Muslim figure grew by eight percent: from 48.58 percent to 56.07 percent.<sup>15</sup>

This set of statistics raises many questions: how did the 10 percent drop in the Hindu population take place? Was there out-migration? If so, to where? Is the Muslim growth a normal growth at about four percent per decade? Is there in-form migration and if so, from where? West Bengal or Bangladesh? The latter has a border with both Barpeta and Goalpara as well as Dhubri and Cachar, all with substantial Muslim populations.

Take the case of Goalpara; here the increase is even steeper—the Muslim population grew from 41.46 percent to 50.18 percent.<sup>16</sup> The Hindu and non-Muslim population dropped from 50.17 percent to 39.89 percent.<sup>17</sup> Again this raises more questions than answers: are these natural growth patterns? What are the fertility/birth and death rates? Where are the Hindus going? To other districts? If so, to which ones?

It is not my wish here to say unequivocally that the demographic changes in these two districts are the case of immigration from Bangladesh. That is difficult to state in the absence of comparative data from the corresponding districts in Bangladesh and the rate of out-migration to India. But common sense dictates that the push and pull factors that drive all migrations worldwide are as much at play here as elsewhere. The fact of a common border with Bangladesh cannot be wished away either.

Let us turn here to the overall demographic pattern in Assam. While the Hindu and non-Muslim population grew at the rate of 45.39 percent in the two decades, the Muslim population grew much faster at 77.42 percent.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, a better number crunching exercise is required than is possible in this limited paper. But such an exercise is a must because the apprehension of the Assamese, that they could become a minority in their own land, has suddenly become starkly real. It is no longer an emotional issue.

The language data is not yet available nor is the migration data from the census material. But language is not necessarily an accurate method of determining migration patterns. For example, many Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants gave their mother tongue as Assamese in successive censuses and were called the Natun Asamiya or

New Assamese as part of a broader social and political compact that sought to include and not disturb them.

On the other hand, religious affiliations are a better gauge in determining the growth of immigrants and their descendants. But there are other statistics which underline the crisis.

## **ELECTION COMMISSION**

As in 1980, The Election Commission is today in the middle of a controversy that addresses the core of the problem.

For years, the Commission and the Assam Government have had a stand off on the question of illegal votes on electoral lists. In January 1994, the Commission defined 40 assembly constituencies (out of 126) as places where an abnormal growth of votes was noted. A special revision was ordered and a summary revision in 86 others. The process was completed in November 1994 but a subsequent full and intensive updating of all rolls was challenged by the All Assam Minorities Students Union (AAMSU) in the Guwahati High Court. AAMSU claimed the revisions were discriminatory.

The court issued a stay on the request which it vacated in December 1995. This has left the commission little or no time to conduct a full revision of the rolls in Assam while the process is complete in virtually all other states. The Commission has ordered a summary revision which cannot deal with all the objections.

A brief look at the statistics should suffice here: in some districts/Assembly constituencies, deletions have reduced the number of voters to the 1991 figures or lower although revisions were carried out in 1992, 1993 and 1994.

In sensitive districts such as Barpeta, Silchar, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Mangaldoi, Nowgong (Nagaon), Dibrugarh and even Lakhimpur, the pattern is the same.

Between 1991 and 1992, the number of electors in Assam grew from 1,18,92,068 to 1,36,29,993. <sup>19</sup> This figure fell to 1,29,15,013 in 1993 and further to 1,18,00,678 in 1994. <sup>20</sup>

Take the examples of Barpeta and Goalpara assembly seats alone (we referred earlier to the census figures that point to demographic growth here): <sup>21</sup>

	1991	1992	1993	1994
Barpeta	106,292	118,179	105,521	91,712
Goalpara East	95,520	111,520	109,593	89,824
Goalpara West	84,242	90,397	86,177	74,901

Similar figures exist for other sensitive assembly segments and only go to support the concern expressed on this issue. A detailed analysis is needed for it is not necessary that the revisions have been absolutely sharp in their accuracy.

To clear misunderstanding, the Election Commission needs enough time to conduct an intensive revision of the rolls.

This is clearly unacceptable and must be made plain to the Commission, the Government of Assam, different political parties and the Government of India.

This atrocity is sought to be inflicted on a state which has one of the most sensitive and violent histories of resistance relating to migration, settlement and elections! Clearly it is time that the Assamese heeded Gandhiji's advice to Bardoloi's emissaries:

“If you do not act correctly and now Assam will be finished. Tell Barodoloi that Assam must not lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else I will say that Assam had only manniken and not men.”<sup>22</sup>

Without an intensive revision of the rolls, no election in Assam-given the demographic changes that have taken place-can be either free or fair. Indeed, if held, balloting is likely to be accompanied by the kind of violence that visited the state in 1983. And that would be an even greater tragedy.

## **ROOT CAUSES**

Let us now look at the issues of land, demographic pressure and environmental scarcity which underpin the problems we have considered earlier.

Why are migrants coming from Bangladesh and earlier from East Pakistan? What are the push and pull factors? Is land scarcity a major problem? Where are they coming from? And where are they going?

In numerous respects, Bangladesh represents the Malthusian nightmare:<sup>23</sup> too many mouths to feed and too little food or too many people on too little land. The population of 115 million continues to grow at an estimated pace of between 2.2 and 3 percent per year. It has doubled in the past thirty years. The country's population density of over 800 per square kilometer is the world's highest. Bangladesh is one of the poorest nations in the world, with a per capita income of less than 170 dollars per year, half that of India. The country has struggled to increase its per capita income, but in 1986, half of the population still had inadequate energy intakes and 58 percent of rural children and 44 percent of urban children suffered from chronic malnutrition. The infant mortality rate was about 110 per thousand, one of the highest in the world. Less than one-third of the adults were literate, and although three-quarters of the children enrolled in primary school, two-thirds of them dropped out before secondary school.

Nearly 80 percent of the agricultural land is already covered by rice, and nearly 60 percent of the country's investments are financed by foreign aid. The growth in

population has led to a situation where the average farm holding is less than one hectare (or less than 2 acres). Despite their lower costs, high-yielding modern varieties of food grains have not been introduced to all areas where they would increase productivity. By one estimate, such varieties now cover 40 percent of the cereal-growing areas, but their potential remains largely unexploited because of flooding. Estimates indicate that if irrigation were extended to 62 percent of the cultivated area, food-grain production would reach the level of 30.7 million tons, a vast leap over the current level of 18 to 19 million tons. This output could feed an estimated 185 million people at current levels of food intake.

The attractions of more thinly populated lands across the borders are immense. Bangladesh has a high population density as we have already seen. The density of population in India's northeast is far less. Assam's is 284 per square kilometer; the figures are 78 for Meghalaya, 262 for Tripura, and 33 for Mizoram. West Bengal, however, has a reported density almost on par with Bangladesh: 766 per square kilometer, the highest among all major states of India.

Bangladesh maintains officially that its nationals prefer to go to the Gulf where there are opportunities, rather than to India which can offer little. Yet, most do go to India because as unskilled laborers, they find a ready market in the subcontinent for maids, building workers, and porters. Bangladesh journalists and officials privately acknowledge the fact of continuing out-migration. While economic conditions in the bordering Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya may not be ideal, they are better than conditions in Bangladesh, land and work are available.

There are two basic factors that favour an immigrant moving from Bangladesh to northeastern India. One is that the migrant speaks Bengali, a language that is spoken by more than 170 million people in the region, making the Bengalis one of the largest linguistic groups in the world. Language gives access to jobs, property and education. A second factor is that many migrants have relatives on the other side of the border.

Out-migration has been a perennial feature of East Bengal since before the end of the British Raj; it continued through the year of East Pakistan and post-partition; and it continues today from Bangladesh across the borders of eastern India. More than anything else, the migrants are fleeing the poverty-related degradation of their lives that have given them little choice but to leave their homes for another land.

According to one estimate, population growth in Bangladesh will slash in half the amount of cropland available per capita by 2025. This crisis is worsened by the fact that all of the country's good farmland has already been heavily exploited. "At about 0.08 hectare per capita, cropland is already desperately scarce", says the study. "Flooding and inadequate national and community institutions for water control exacerbate the lack of land and the brutal poverty and turmoil it engenders".

The poverty of Bangladesh is in no small way attributable to the region's vulnerability of natural disasters. Bangladesh seems to move through an unending cycle of floods, cyclones, devastation, death, drought and famine. Marauding rivers burst their banks and change course with impunity, and heavy silting raises the level of river beds and increases the size of the flood plains, wiping out entire villages and reducing even the affluent to penury. More than one million people have been killed

by floods since 1961. And the 1988 floods, the worst in recent memory, reduced rice production by 1.6 million tons and cause 1.3 billion dollars' worth of damage to roads, railroads, houses and industrial machinery.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC DATA**

We also need to look at data that will enable us to see the other side (Bangladeshi) and see if it supports the views expressed above.

Rough estimates are available of the numbers of migrants moving over the year out of Bangladesh and into northeast India. A significant study by Sharifa Begum,<sup>24</sup> of the Bangladesh institute of Development Studies in Dhaka, represents the first semi-official acknowledgement by Dhaka of the size of the migration problem.

According to begum, between 3.15 and 3.5 million people migrated from East Pakistan to India between 1951 and 1961. And between 1961 and 1974, another 1.5 million migrated. A national census was conducted in 1961 and 1974. the 1974 census was the first in independent Bangladesh. The latter figure is based on census figures and incorporates estimates of deaths from the 1970 cyclone and from the Bangladesh liberation war. But it appears to be a conservative estimate for it does not take into account the 10 million who fled the repression of the Pakistan Army in 1970 and 1971 before an Indian military victory allowed them to return home. Most of the migrants returned; yet nearly a million (believed to be mostly Hindus) stayed in India, apparently blending into the countryside. All this adds up to an outflow of 6 million in the 23 years between 1951 and 1974.

In a more recent paper,<sup>25</sup> Begum states that although statistics for migration are not available after 1974, there is no valid reason to suggest that migration ceased at that time. She adds that in fact there are indications that Bangladesh lost a substantial proportion of its population from 1974 to 1981 due to migration and famine.

Though Bangladesh persists in its proclamations that it has no illegal aliens in India, Bangladeshi communities have sprung up in New Delhi and Bombay. While the Government of India declares that there are about 100,000 Bangladeshi migrants in Delhi, intelligence estimates say the figure is actually closer to 200,000.

The Border Security Force that patrols the Indian side of the international frontier says that it detained more than 56,000 Bangladeshis trying to cross into West Bengal in 1990. Detentions and deportations of people held at the border in Assam and Tripura were far less, estimated at several hundred. "The rule of thumb in this game is that for every illegal immigrant caught, at least four get through, especially if they're Hindu", says one senior Indian diplomat, who knows the problem well. He states that the issue is raised at virtually every Indo-Bangladesh meeting of officials, diplomats and politicians. "But illegal migration remains the unfinished agenda of every dialogue, the unresolved issue. It's really a dialogue of the deaf: we tell Dhaka these people are coming in, Dhaka says they're not Bangladeshis, they're Indian smugglers of citizens returning after illegally visiting relatives or friends in Bangladesh".

This raises the question of what is to be done.

Let me outline a series of steps which I believe can tackle the problem at its roots and develop a road toward cooperative endeavour in the region, for it is only a regional approach that can work.

Migration will continue, especially from Bangladesh and Nepal, No wall, law or police force anywhere in the world has been able to stop it. People, like water, always find their level for survival. But if massive inflows are to be checked then we have to find strategies of helping Bangladesh and Nepal develop their economies and help curb an out flow of people. Otherwise there will be snowballing conflicts over land and other resources as nearly a billion Indians and nearly 200 million Bangladeshis will compete for jobs and land by the year 2020. Without policies on population, migration, flood and river control, we may see a clash of nationalities and border communities that will overshadow ethnic conflict elsewhere in the world. If we consider that pressure on natural resources and cultural/ethnic identity are the basis for conflict, then we must also accept that the trigger for change lies in tackling these very issues.

Economic development, rooted in cooperation in water and other resource sharing, multilateral trade and assisting communities at the micro level, instead of imposing centrally-sponsored schemes on them, are the opportunities for a change. Again, I would stress here that the sense of inclusion and participation of the local communities is critical in making programmes work rather than a paternalism that provokes bitterness.

Some steps are being taken in this direction with the adoption of a South Asia free trade zone by the member nations of SAARC. Indeed, the region as we have defined it in this article makes a coherent trading bloc for it has time, tradition and geography on its side. But is SAARC is to be more meaningful this eastern Himalayan stretch and its plains must become the focus of attention and cooperation, transforming the lives of millions of people.

Some specific strategies towards such a goal are:

- ❖ Devise economic strategies within Bangladesh that will enable people to stay within their countries rather than migrate. This would include developing markets and opportunities at home which can only come as part of a larger strategy that involves its neighbours.
- ❖ Strengthen existing Constitutional safeguards for small communities so that they can survive the inflow of migrants and the growth of larger domestic populations. In addition, they need to be trained in skills that will enable them to compete outside their enclaves.
- ❖ As many as 54 large, medium and small rivers flow into Bangladesh; all of them originate outside the country, giving it few alternatives in its regular battles against floods. One would suggest a network of small and medium dams as run of the river projects in parts of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh to tap a fraction of the vast reserves of hydro energy that are, going waste and creating flood havoc downstream.

- ❖ The easing of floods would open up new land for cultivation and harvesting and ease some of the demographic pressures. It would also enable Bangladesh to get more water when needed. The tapping of the smaller streams would be a major source of river water during the dry months when farmers most need it.
- ❖ Sell the power within the region or export it to other parts of India and Southeast Asia. Energy hunger is destined to grow rapidly in the next few decades as industrialisation and unshackled economies surge forward.
- ❖ Increase the open trade between countries and communities by building better roads and other transport and communication facilities. Revive the water transport system that would generate employment, trade and better communication and decrease freight costs. Develop a series of inland ports that would cater to the revived river traffic and make Calcutta the hub of this river strategy as an inland port and not an, international seaport, a role for which it is no longer suited but which Paradeep is better placed to play. It would also lessen the reliance on Farakka and remove a major instance between the two countries.
- ❖ Give port and transit facilities to countries of the region and make legal travel easier.
- ❖ Develop local economic schemes with regard to handicraft and handloom development, marketing local products and improved agriculture and water use strategies including better seed technologies, that will strengthen community- based economies.
- ❖ Develop education projects that enable students and people from the new zone to learn about each other by teaching the languages, histories and traditions in educational institutions. We know so little about each other. It is perhaps easier to learn about the Chakmas at Harvard and Cambridge than in Calcutta or Shillong. It is time these information gaps were plugged so that dogmas are tackled and misunderstandings are cleared.
- ❖ An information and communication network involving journalists and communicators of the region needs to be made broader and deeper. Journalists from the print, audio and visual media need to travel to each other's countries and states to understand the core issues. Without a change in attitudes, no policies, however laudable, will work.
- ❖ An international airport at Guwahati could be part of a methodical approach to improve regional infrastructure, giving industry and entrepreneurs opportunities to trade with Dhaka and also with the fast-growing economics of Southeast Asia.

Questions of identity will continue to be raised and resistance to centre-driven changes will drag on for many years. But it is time for the peoples of this region, who have suffered long enough, to prepare themselves for new challenges and

opportunities.

Failure to seize the moment can lead to major conflicts among communities and states, devastating both.

Before ending, one must address the questions of the need for policies on migration and refugee flows.

The Government of India singularly lacks a single policy on these issues.

Fifty years after gaining independence, surely it is time that we discussed these questions openly, embracing the forums of open debate and free speech to articulate the problems and possible answers.

Ad hoc responses have created the mess that exists in our Northeast or Far East. We need long-term, well-reasoned approaches to migration and forced displacement—like the Chakma refugees who left East Pakistan in 1964 and now have become such a source of conflict in Arunachal Pradesh where they have lived as law-abiding citizens (without the actual benefit of citizenship) for 31 years. The Arunachalis want them out but many of the Chakmas have been born since their parents moved to India. The fact of birth in Indian territory makes them Indian, though they may not have officially applied for citizenship. Yet, they are still stateless and remain discriminated against.

There is the question of how traditional societies cope with the sweeping transitions that they face through instant communications, exposure to new lifestyles and new pressures. Is there a way of helping with this transition so that the best traditions are married to new skills that enable communities to progress and not stagnate or be overwhelmed?

These issues need to be openly discussed and addressed. When does a migrant cease to be an immigrant? What time span is required to accept him/her as an Indian national? Must legal formalities be insisted upon as a price for citizens? Or can there be a general amnesty for all illegal immigrants (who have come before a “cutoff” date? What should be a cut off date)? What are the economic benefits of migration—and there are many, including a cheap and hardworking labour force that will handle tasks that the local population may shirk.

It is time to examine these questions rigorously and frankly. Hiding the issues under the carpet—as has happened for the past decades—has led to missed opportunities and much tension and bitterness. We no longer have the luxury of time to brush them aside.

Migration is one of the crucial issues of our times. This is the opportunity to consider it and search for ways to tackle it.

## ***FOOTNOTES:***

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in *Strangers of the Mist*, Sanjoy Hazarika, Penguin, 1995, p 65

<sup>2</sup> Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, Orient Longmans, 1988, p 55.

<sup>3</sup> D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: The Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, (Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt.of India) Vol. 6, p 152-53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 152-3.

<sup>5</sup> Gopinath Bardoloi Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum, New Delhi ( Titled: A Note on Assam's Stand vis-à-vis British Government Statement of 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1946).

<sup>6</sup> Hazarika, *op.cit.* p 138.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p 139.

<sup>8</sup> *The Sentinel*, cited in Hazarika, *op.cit* p 251.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*,p 251.

<sup>10</sup> Tendulkar, *op.cit.* p 152-3.

<sup>11</sup> Census of India, 1991, Paper-2 of 1992, Final Population Table, Registrar General of India, New Delhi, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> Report in *Sentinel-Home Link*, 30 December 1995.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Informal Note, Election Commission of India, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Gopinath Bardoloi Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Much of this section is drawn on my earlier published work: *Strangers in the Mist* (above cit.); *Bangladesh & Assam: Land Pressures, Migration & Ethnic Conflict*, American Academy of Arts & Sciences and University College, University of Toronto, No. 3, March 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Sharifa Begum, "Birth rate and Death rate in Bangladesh 1951-74", Dhaka, Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies, 1979.

<sup>25</sup> Begum, *Population, Birth, Death and Growth rates in Bangladesh; Census Estimates*, Dhaka, Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies, 1990.