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**Political Manifestation of Economic Backwardness In Assam**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Since Aristotle social philosophers have often contemplated that economic inequality is an intrinsic cause of political violence and unrest. A huge chunk of literature holds the view that the way wealth is dispersed in the society is the sole indicator of the extent of inequality. De Tocqueville also of the view that all revolutions that have changed the destiny of nations were meant to either consolidate or ameliorate social inequality. Karl Marx was also of the view that political violence has its roots in the unequal distribution of wealth. He had held that private property results in the unequal distribution of social wealth which impoverishes the proletariat and makes them politically conscious. This consciousness in turn leads to revolution. He believed that deprivation and exploitation is essentially the result of inequality between the various classes in the society. It is however significant to note that contemporary social science research has concluded that the level of economic development is a powerful indicator of political violence. The age-old principle that inequality in the distribution of land/property leads to political violence has found partial acceptance in contemporary writings. Nevertheless, it is a hard fact that the level of economic wellbeing in any society is closely linked to the extent of political unrest / rest in the society. Every society in the world is subjected to some extent of political unrest resulting in violent outbursts, thereby, creating a law-and-order problem. It is a common trend to attribute the causes of such violence to geopolitical or other social factors. No serious attempts however have ever been made to provide economic explanations for such phenomena. Even though economic factors are not the sole explanatory variables of political unrest, but they play a significant role in causing political unrest and violence. This has resulted in bringing within the fold of economic indicators such concepts as income growth, socio-economic mobility, optimum level of income inequality and the like. Even though a situation of latent political unrest exists in all societies and at all times, but they do not result in political violence unless economic and political changes have risen to newer heights threatening the very existence of the political system. Economically speaking whenever a section of the population of any society feels dissatisfied and frustrated with the existing economic and political conditions, they resort to violence instead of peaceful means to pressuring the government. Such a situation can be aptly compared to that of Assam. A study of the relationship between economic factors and conditions of political violence thus calls for a study of the permanent and temporal economic determinants of political violence in Assam during the 1980's. Even in the most developed countries of the world there may be individuals whose partial requirements are met or there may be some whose total requirements remain unfulfilled. This means that the struggle to ensure the flow of needs and goods is a continuous process both in developed and developing countries but the degree and nature in which this struggle politically manifests may vary from being moderate to violent outbursts.

**KEY WORDS:**

Economic inequality, political unrest, immigration, the British rule, Bangladeshi refugees, Ahoms, infiltration, livelihood, economic impact, agriculture, agitation, anti-foreigner movement, grievances, neglect, ethnic

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#### INTRODUCTION:

Political unrest in Assam has a long history. It is not of a recent origin. An objective analysis of the Assam problem can be had only when the economic dimension of the contextual reality is taken into consideration. In other words, a desired insight into the Assam crisis can be had only when its roots i.e., the economic problems and its origin are thoroughly analyzed. Without understanding the material roots that gave birth to political unrest in the state one cannot dream of understanding the actual nature of the problem in Assam. The beginning of Assam's economic problem can be traced to the period of British colonial rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which marked Assam's entry into the modern industrial age. For the British Assam proved to be a source of wealth which could be plundered and exploited for their own benefit irrespective of the well-being of the local population. The stranglehold of foreign capital on the state's natural resources led to the establishment of a massive tea plantation economy and oil producing centers. The mercantile interests of the East India company ensured the expansion of the tea industry. Trouble and tension in Assam is endemic. In some form or the other it has always been present even before the advent of the East India Company or the British. In fact, the problem of militancy in Assam is not merely a problem of governance but it has deeper roots leaving its impact on the entire society. It is not a fight of the minorities against the majorities and vice-versa, but it is a struggle which is based on certain misconceptions of some groups seeking to make their presence felt in the society in a prominent way. The problem of militancy in the state calls for a deeper study of its roots which, though not totally, is primarily economic in character. The case of immigration in the state demands utmost attention in this context.

#### AIM OF THE STUDY:

Assam is a strategically crucial state, in addition to being endowed with abundant natural resources. The latter has resulted in attracting people and communities for centuries and their meeting and mingling resulting in the emergence of a composite population. While heterogeneity in languages and ethnic groups provide a distinct identity to the State, it also results in the creation of unique problems. At the same time, the bountiful natural resources of Assam, have not resulted in economic development that matches the rest of the country. What has been a prominent feature of Assam since the past few decades or so has been a series of political movements and developments that demonstrate a great deal of frustration of different local groups on both economic and political grounds. These have resulted in the rise of different politically dominant groups, with varying implications for the actual development processes of the state, but this needs to be analyzed in some depth. My article focusses on how recurrent economic maladies in the State of Assam have prompted the process of political mobilization as the ultimate means for their redressal particularly since the 1980s. It was in the 1980s that the anti-foreigner's movement was at its peak, violence ensued against the ethnic minorities throughout the Brahmaputra valley the economy of Assam received a further set back from which it has not fully recovered even today. Excessive dependence on agriculture in the State during the same period, resulting in a continuous decline in average size of holdings along with halfhearted attempts to rejuvenate this crucial sector did not augur well for the agricultural development in the State, either.

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

1. Baruah, Sanjib, *India Against Itself-Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1999.)

This book is an excellent piece of work expressing the author's concern with sub-national conflicts that are going on in North-East India, particularly Assam. How the movement of separatism has led to serious and sustained political crisis thereby

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creating a crisis of governability is the main theme of the book. The Indian State's response to regional separatist movements and the various tools used by it to contain the situation also finds adequate treatment in the book.

2. Bhattacharjee, Chandna, '*Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement-Case of Bodo-Kacharis of Assam*' (Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1996.)

This book seeks to understand the socio-political dynamics of the tribal population of Assam particularly the Bodos. It studies the process of social evolution of the Bodo, their identity consciousness which in turn has caused a widespread socio-political turmoil in the State in particular and the nation in general. This book can go a long way in providing details about the causes of resentment among the tribals of Assam and the failures of the government to live up to their demands.

3. Chattopadhyay, Dilip Kumar, '*History of the Assam movement since 1947*' (Minerva Associates, Calcutta, 1990.)

The study basically deals with the mobilization of an ethnic community the local Assamese and has described and evaluated their perceptions of themselves as a beleaguered native population threatened in all respects by aggressive immigrant minorities. As such the author has trace the development of the movement in Assam from its roots and has sought to demonstrate its impact on regional and national politics. However, this book has nothing much to say about the historical background of economic deprivation in Assam in a wider perspective. My study would try to fill this void.

4. Hussain, Imdad ed. '*The Guwhati Declaration and the Road to Peace in Assam*', (Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2005.)

This is an excellent book on the effects of continuing unsettled political environment of Assam on her process of development. Assam inspite of having abundant natural resources continue to economically lag behind most other states in the country. This is despite the fact that at the time of independence the State's growth rate was much higher than the national average. The above mentioned book (in an attempt to provide answers to what went wrong and what is the way out) has very intelligently concentrated on understanding the phenomenon of conflict and violence in the State and has stressed the need for peace as the first desirable step for the resolution of any problem in the state but this book does not give sufficient attention to the materialistic basis of all conflict-ridden situations in the State.

5. Sarmah, A. '*Immigration and Assam Politics*', (Ajanta Books International, Delhi, 1999.)

This book closely examines the impact of immigration on the policy pronouncements and actions of various political parties in Assam. The position of national / regional parties vis-à-vis the issue of immigration and the movement generated by it is the central theme of this book. However, the book does not adequately deal with economic and social repercussions of immigration and how it can lead to a crisis-ridden situation, thereby taking a toll on the development activities of the government. As far as the issue of immigration leading to the anti-foreigner movement and the role of political parties are concerned it is a very satisfactory book.

6. Singh, K. S, ed. '*People of India: Assam*', (Seagull Books, Delhi, 2003.)

This book is of immense help for a general knowledge of the Assamese society, its economy, and the mode of living of the people. Before embarking on any research, a broad perspective of the issue at hand is indispensable. Any problem pertaining to the State of Assam calls for a thorough knowledge about the state and its people in general and this book serves the purpose well, but it is a general study and does not deal with the intricate relationship between economic and politics pertaining to the State which my study intends to take up.

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The coming of foreigners into Assam is an old history as old as the state itself. Such immense is the problem that almost all people residing in the state today seem to have come from different places at different period of time. The Karbis, the Aryans, the various tribes and likewise have come to this region from different areas. Some element of political stability was introduced in the Brahmaputra valley around the seventeenth century when the Ahoms established their rule over the other kings. The Ahoms always kept themselves in touch with the rest of India, but they continued with the process of migration as they encouraged their own people to enter the region in a large scale and also brought in the region culturally prominent people. It was during this time that the Brahmins who exercised enormous influence on the Ahom rulers were successful in introducing the caste system in Assam. Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the British started commercial activities in the region. But it was during this time that the Ahom rulers began to show signs of contradictions in the exercise of their authority. Soon enough the Ahom rulers become weak paving the way for the Burmese invasions. With political crisis looming large in the region the British intervened and drove away the Burmese invaders. Thereafter slowly and gradually the British began to bring under its control the entire region including the hilly areas. To suit their colonial designs the British rulers made certain territorial adjustments and readjustments in certain areas of the region. The hilly regions were inhabited by tribal groups who held a rebellious character because of which all attempts were made by the British rulers to keep them apart from the people of the plains. They as such devised the inner line system in 1873 to prevent any migration into the hills but migration into the plain areas of Assam was encouraged in a systematic manner. The British wanted to extract more and more from the entire region but as the cultivable land was in excess large-scale immigration began to be encouraged so that their earnings could be enhanced. "As the Assamese were initially reluctant to learn English, the British brought along with them many English knowing Bengalis to work as clerks, lawyers and other professionals". It was during this time that the process of tea cultivation was begun in the region. Labourers required for tea plantation was brought in from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and other areas including Madras. A number of Marwaries also came over to Assam in search of economic opportunities and made the place their home and carried out business activities. The British in order to increase the state revenue and to cultivate the barren lands began to incite Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal to migrate and settle in the region. As such lakhs of landless and poor peasants began to come and settle in the Brahmaputra valley, looking for a decent means of earning a livelihood. These poor peasants were very hard working as compared to the local population. They were determined to cultivate the wastelands and despite the challenge posed by natural calamities they were successful in turning the valley into a rich land. These Muslim immigrants were originally Bengalis but very soon they assimilated with the Assamese society and also began to speak Assamese instead of Bengali. The flow of Muslim peasants into the Brahmaputra valley who primarily settled in areas like Lakhimpur, Goalpara, Kamrup etc. continued even with India achieving freedom in 1947. Even after independence large influx of population from East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh later) kept coming into Assam as it proved to be a promising economic destination. Both Hindus and Muslim came as refugees, and they began to earn a livelihood either by working as casual labourers or as peasants. The politicians however did nothing to check the flow of outsiders into this region as they were lured by the vote banks. Uncertain electoral gains made the political parties adopt an indifferent attitude towards this problem of infiltration. But the long-term impact of such a regular flow of immigrants was bound to have a negative impact on the social economic, cultural and political life of the people of this region. The impact of such outsiders coming and making Assam their home was soon



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to be felt in the form of violent outbursts of agitation and student protests. Voice of dissent against this large influx of migrants was expressed as early as in the 1940s, during the days of the constituent Assembly i.e., even before our present parliament come into being. Since then, in every successive parliament this issue is being raised on a regular basis. The policy of encouraging immigration into Assam drastically changed the demographic picture of the state to the extent that the size of the non-indigenous population of Assam could be counted in lakhs by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is however important to note that during the British rule the process of immigration began with the coming / or bringing into the region labourers required for the purpose of tea plantation. They came from various districts of Bengal. They settled in the areas of tea plantation and in the towns. Then the Muslim peasants came from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) who came and settled in the rural areas of the state and turned the vast tracts of uncultivated land into greener pastures. In addition to the East Bengalis, Nepalis also began to enter Assam and further increased the size of the immigrants. The process of outsiders coming and settling in Assam distorted the nature of population of the State and the local Assamese began to express anxiety and dissent as they were worried of losing their identity in their own State under the pressure of the migrants. Various leaders of the Assamese society expressed concerns about the problem of immigration because during the first half of the twentieth century itself, Assam had absorbed so much of outsiders into itself that its capacity to assimilate further was doubted.

The Assamese society has always been an infirm one. Apart from tea plantations the Assamese society remained unconnected with the forces of modern capitalism till the late 1950's. Plantations of any type do not encourage development. Moreover, the various ethnic groups were not knit into cohesive group because of which they became vulnerable to outside pressures. Thus, economically materially and culturally Assam remained a backward national group as compared to other such groups in the country. This was the primary reason as to why the local Assamese even failed to remain undisputed masters of their territory for long. In fact, the colonial rulers had set loose the process of peril by imposing Bengali as the official language of the province. It was only after years of struggle by the educated middle-class Assamese that the language could be restored. The colonial authorities had always made attempts to keep the Assamese and Bengali communities directly opposed to each other. The poor and land hungry peasants were brought from the eastern districts of Bengal (now Bangladesh) by the colonial authorities to earn the benefit of agricultural development and the full use of land resource without spending anything on it. It is significant to note that the immigration of the Muslim peasants into Assam was primarily linked with the growth of jute industry in and around Calcutta under the British hegemony. As the areas of jute cultivation in Bengal soon got exhausted it was decided by the colonial rulers to grow the same in the land of Assam. This was the logic behind encouraging the immigration of Muslim peasants who were expert jute cultivators and had knowledge of superior and intensive cropping patterns of diverse type. The East Bengal peasants were equipped with superior sowing agricultural techniques because of which they could teach Assam not only to grow jute but also other types of crops. Thus, as a result of a large flow of Muslim peasants the amount of land devoted to jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley increased drastically within a span of few years. Ironically enough, the Assamese land families who were economically powerful, adopted a passive attitude to the flow or influx of outsiders because the process of agricultural development also promised an increase in their income and overall property. Thus, a certain portion of the Assamese middle class played an important role in encouraging the process of immigration. Only that Assamese middle class who were indifferent to the survival of the Assamese culture promoted the cause of immigration while the rest who were very much concerned to preserve Assamese identity opposed the entire process and began to voice their

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dissent against it. It is crucial to note here that the roots of discontent or the beginnings of protest movements against the onslaught of Assam by the foreigners could be traced as early as the first half of the twentieth century. The poor peasants from East Bengal were treated in the utmost inhuman manner by the colonial government and the same treatment was meted out to the immigrant tea garden labourers. The poor peasants as such was so distressed that they fell a prey to the appeal of the communal forces that gathered momentum in the entire country during the 1930's when the Civil Disobedience movement lost its cause. The indigenous Assamese peasants and the landed middle class of Assam become jittery of the entire situation. The situation became all the more unacceptable when deliberate attempts were made by the Muslim League ministry of Assam to increase the percentage of Muslims in Assam by encouraging more and more of immigration. It was during this time that the local landed Assamese began to raise their voice against the immigrants. Strong voices of protests were made by the local population but the national leadership at that time was not too serious to take up the issue. The real problem actually started when the immigrants started settling on lands which were meant for grazing purposes and also in the plain areas. The British government in Assam had introduced the Line System in 1920 so that the immigrants could settle and toil only in particular areas and beyond which their movement was restricted, thus in a way preventing the assimilation of the local Assamese with the immigrants. But very soon the Line System was not followed, and it was then that Assamese middle class began to seriously view the problem of immigrants and began to consider it as a menace. With India attaining independence the influx of Muslim immigrants stopped for a while, but Hindu refugees came into large numbers fearing religious persecution. Besides Hindus refugees, Muslims infiltrators continued coming into Assam for economic reasons. The coming of Hindu refugees was soon curbed because of anti-Bengali riots and also because of violence which was the outcome of insurgency in the State. In Assam the illegal migrants coming from Bangladesh are majority Muslims. Before dealing with the problem of illegal migration in Assam, any further one should also take into consideration the contributory factors that facilitate this process of migration. Assam is a strategic and crucial border state of India. The influx of migrants as already discussed was initiated by the British primarily for economic reasons but after independence this issue of immigration assumed political and communal overtones and has become a matter of grave concern. Such large-scale illegal migration from East Pakistan / Bangladesh for several decades has altered the democratic complexion of the state. In the year 1998 the then Governor of Assam Lieutenant general (Retd.) S.K. Sinha had in a report presented to the then president of India dated November 8, 1998, had warned that the influx of illegal Bangladeshi immigration posing a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese population and to our national security. He had insisted that the policy makers and the central government in New Delhi should not consider it as a regional problem affecting only the state of Assam, but they should also realize that this problem sooner or later is bound to challenge the national security of the country. The failure of the Central Government to take up this issue of infiltration in a serious manner has facilitated a number of external factors to influence political developments in the border States of the Northeastern region of the country.

As said illegal migration to Assam has been taking place mainly for economic factors. Bangladesh is a very densely populated country. Its population grows in millions every year. Because of natural calamities like floods millions of people lose their homes every year. Nearly sixty percent of the population in Assam live below the poverty line. Moreover the per capita income in Bangladesh is much lower than in India. The sole factor which makes our country easily accessible to the Bangladeshis is that border between India and Bangladesh is very porous. Perpetual population movement from Bangladesh to India then becomes a natural phenomenon. This

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process can only be halted if effective measures are taken by both the countries to tackle it. Another contributing factor facilitating immigration from Bangladesh is ethnic / linguistic and religious in nature. In India numerous people living in the border area have ethnic, linguistic and religious affinity with the illegal migrants because of which the latter finds a sympathetic behavior from their Indian brethren. As such detection of these illegal migrants is a difficult task. Unfortunately, enough some political parties in the state of Assam are inciting and helping the process of such immigration for the sole and selfish purpose of building and preserving vote banks. Sometimes these immigrants are also acceptable among the local population as they provide cheap labour for domestic work with very low remuneration as they come from a very poor background. Sometimes corrupt officials also lend a helping hand to these illegal entrants in the State in return for bribe. Forged certificates along with other documents are made available to these illegal migrants in return for money. Recently such a racket was detected in Lakhimpur. It is to note that though the Bangladesh government has not been involved in sending streams of its population to Assam, but it has neither taken any strong steps to prevent the same. It is to be noted that whenever there has been an economic or social crisis in Bangladesh the flow of its nationals into Assam has increased manifold. For example, during the Bangladesh liberation war the flow of immigrants had become massive. This influx in large / small numbers continues even now. Right from 1901 the population of Assam has witnessed an abnormal growth unlike the growth in other states of the country. This is primarily because of unaccounted migration in the State, and it has no parallel with other states of the country. Such an abnormal growth in the population of the State is bound to have diverse implications.

The economic impact of Bangladeshi migrants is severely felt on the economy of the State. A high pressure of population in a state which has a predominant rural economy obviously means an excessive pressure on agricultural land. The density of population in Assam is much high as compared to the national average. It is however important to note that most Bangladeshi migrants constitute the manual workforce in the state. They constitute such section of the workers as construction workforce, road construction workers, gardeners, house painters, vegetable sellers etc. The women folk generally work as maids. The poor sections of Bangladeshi society can easily find manual jobs in the state of Assam as the local Assamese labourers are unwilling to take up all kinds of laborious tasks. These migrants are even willing to work at odd hours and that too with a low salary / wage. As the local Assamese are not inclined to do all types of labour the migrants very easily can find a space in the workspace of the State. What is even more dangerous is that these illegal migrants easily procure documents from the black market and without any fear of detection produce them when demanded by the concerned authorities. This is a threat not only to the sanctity of the State and central government but more importantly at the ground level they also pose a threat to the legal Indian citizen. The irony of the situation is that these illegal migrants on procuring false documents become eligible enough to claim benefits for those schemes which are meant to cover the requirements of the low-income groups in the State like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and the like. Thus, the legal Indian citizens of the State of Assam stand to lose against the body of illegal citizenry. The situation is not prevalent only in Assam but in other states of India as well like Nagaland, Meghalaya, and the like.

From a political point of view these illegal migrants also have a standing. Most of the political parties in the state depend upon the votes of these illegal migrants and derive political fortunes from their votes. The absurdity of the situation lies in the fact that the local political parties and the local politicians for obvious reasons refuse to act an issue that affects the entire society of which they are the representatives. Thus, the credibility of the local political party and their leaders are lost. The common

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people as such find themselves in a helpless situation and they become cynical of their political leaders. In order to tackle the issue of illegal migrants in Assam the Central Government (via an act of the parliament) enacted the Illegal Migration (Determination by tribunals) Act in the year 1983, December. The crucial provision of this act was that anybody who has settled in Assam before March 25, 1971, was entitled to be a legal citizen. It is however important to note that except Assam for the rest of the county the cutoff date for acquiring Indian Citizenship July 19, 1948. Ironically enough the IMDT act lays responsibility on the complainant rather than on the accused to prove the citizenship status of the latter. This is directly in contrast to the foreigners Act of 1946 which has fixed the responsibility on the accused. The Act of IMDT was enacted at the point when the anti-foreigner's movement in Assam was at its climax point. On the face of it the Act was meant to serve the interest of the genuine Indian citizens and provide protection to them but in practice it was found to serve the interests of the illegal migrants because as per the provisions of the Act the person accused had nothing to do to prove his / her citizenship, but the complainant had to prove that the person in question was of an illegal status. This Act as such proved to be a failure in its attempt to effectively identify and sending back illegal migrants. The supporters of the Act maintain that this act was meant to protect the minorities from being harassed and victimized and if this Act is done away with the minorities would have to face a lot of hardship. They are also of the view that only a small portion of Bangladeshis are residing in Assam. In fact, they want to retain this Act by all possible meas. The opponents of this Act demand its immediate repeal as it is an unwise and discriminatory legislation applicable only for Assam while in rest of the country (as followed the world over) it is the responsibility of the foreigner to prove that he has all the qualifications for becoming an Indian National. The Act of 1983 or the IMDT Act clearly favours an alien as it places him/ her at an advantageous position by allowing him / her to enter the State of Assam and stay peacefully because he does not have to prove his citizenship status. Because of such reason in the year 2005 their judge bench of the Supreme Court had made a ruling that the IMDT act was the chief hurdle in the process of identification and deportation of illegal migrants in Assam. This Bench was also critical of the fact that very few illegal migrants were actually detected and much fewer were actually expelled. The Bench thus concluded that the IMDT was not in tune with the Indian constitution as it was in direct contrast of Article 355 of the constitution. According to the provisions of this Article it is the duty of the Union of India to protect every state against any outside attack / aggression or any internal disturbances. In short one can conclude that though legal mechanisms have been adopted to curb the inflow of Bangladeshi migrants into Assam, but the solution of the issue seems to be a faraway dream. Lakhs of Bangladeshi migrants have been entering the state, but our law enforcement agencies have failed to effectively perform its duty of duly detecting and deporting these Bangladeshi migrants whenever they make their entry.

Whenever migrants of some other country enter and stays as in some other country intermingling of people is an obvious outcome. This is what happened in Assam. There has always been a fear in the minds of the local Assamese that their cultural, language and religion would be subverted because of the impact of the illegal Bangladeshi. Many Assamese people have time to time expressed fears that if the influx of illegal migrants is not stopped Assam will become a Muslim dominated region. Time and again youth organization in Assam has also been urging the local Assamese to boycott the Bangladeshi in social gathering and to avoid the engagement of Bangladeshi in any task. But such calls have soon fizzled out because in Assam as compared to the local laboures it is the Bangladeshi who provides the cheapest labour. Very often voice may be raised against the illegal Bangladeshi migrants, but the local Assamese have always been employing them for routine manual works for obvious reason. While keeping in mind the negative implications of the illegal



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Bangladeshi migrants on the Assamese economy and society it is important to note that every migrant is not bad / perverted individual. While they have left their own country and have come to stay in Assam mostly is search of livelihood have also been serving the Assamese society by providing them with cheap labour. But as land remains a scare commodity in Assam as in other states and to preserve the requirement of the state's security it is but a wise decision to place a check on people crossing the border. It should also be recorded as to when and for what purposes people are crossing and entering Assam and what is the date of their entry. Unless such steps are taken the state of Assam cannot be made a secured state free from crimes. Moreover, if concrete steps are taken to keep a check on illegal entry of migrants be it Bangladeshis or from any other place, the people of Assam will breathe a sigh of relief as they will enjoy a secured life. The intrusion of illegal migrants should not be regarded as a local problem affecting only the Assam population. Considering the geo-strategic importance of Assam, the growing threat of Islamic fundamentalism arising out of the large-scale intrusion of Bangladesh migrants should not be ignored. There are other states in India where these Bangladeshis have entered illegally like West Bengal, but they pose a greater threat for Assam and if not duly checked strategic and economic results of it would prove to be disastrous not only for Assam but for the entire country. Political parties of all variants must view this problem as a matter of national threatening concern. They should not consider it as a matter of vote bank. It is high time that a national consensus should be built on this sensitive issue threatening the entire nation. Concrete steps need to be taken to seal the border so that there is a check on the unabated flow of illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The IMDT Act has also proved to be a useless act and it calls for necessary positive changes. Sending back these illegal migrants back to Bangladesh is not a viable/practical option. As such necessary steps need to be taken to actually detect the illegal migrants and deny them voting and property right. A new legislation must come into effect to detect the illegal migrants in a fair and expeditious manner. No political party in the country can protest against the above measures meant to check infiltration. These political parties should realize that unless trans-border migration is brought to a halt the state of Assam would not only be in jeopardy but the security of the entire country is at risk.

Interestingly enough voices often have come up from important offices of our country to assist Bangladesh in its process of economic development and poverty amelioration. The country should be helped to promote particularly those socio-economic programmes that improve the condition of women as it would result in multiple beneficiary spin-offs. Once the status of women is upgraded the income of the family would increase. Educated women will also help the cause of population growth and this will indirectly result in lessening of poverty condition. Once the level of poverty comes down immigration of people would also become less.

The IMDT Act which had come into existence as a result of the Assam Accord in 1983 actually in practice did not want any illegal immigrant to be pushed out of the state because as said it had placed the responsibility of proving the citizenship of an illegal immigrant on the complainant unlike the foreigner's act which is applicable in the rest of the country. This act as such did nothing to help the process of identifying and actually deporting the migrants resulting in an unwanted impact on the demography of the state of Assam. The situation had become so volatile that there was an apprehension that soon political power would shift in the hands of the migrants. Because of an increasing number of these illegal migrants from Bangladesh the law-and-order situation in the state was also affected. Strangely enough an increase in the impact of the Bangladesh migrants over Assam society and polity is helping to serve the larger cause of Bangladesh. The extremists of Bangladesh want to expand the boundaries of their country by taking over the whole of north-east, West Bengal and Bihar. A number of districts bordering Assam and West Bengal are already

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dominated by settlers from Bangladesh. The ULFA which had initially launched a movement against the illegal migrants has now developed interests in Bangladesh. Thus, instead of serving the cause of the Assamese society it has now become a violent body opposed to the Indian State and not hesitating to undertake and initiate violent activities. The increasing presence of illegal migrants in Assam had resulted in insurgency in the State thereby discouraging industrialists and businessman from investing in the State. Already limited in its resource, the Bangladeshi immigrants have been availing the benefits of various government schemes, thus placing an additional burden on the State's economy. Such a situation has obviously resulted in tension in the Assamese society because when resources are limited, and the demand is more there is bound to be anger and violence.

The Supreme Court of India fortunately enough had taken into consideration the entire situation and concluded that the IMDT Act instead of detecting and deporting foreigners in the state had facilitated the illegal migrants from Bangladesh to continue to reside in Assam and this was affecting the language, customs and culture of the local Assamese people. The court its ruling had held that presence of these immigrants had changed the demographic character of the entire Northeast region and the local Assamese in some parts of Assam had become a minority. The Court thus scrapped the controversial IMDT Act which was proving advantageous for the illegal migrants and thus has eased the process of identifying and deporting these people. But the Supreme Court's verdict was not liked by those who have been traditionally depending on these illegal migrants for securing votes. However, today things are not that bad as for the first time since the beginning of Assamese agitation against migration (in 1979) the minority groups are also extending a helping hand to the student / political group of the state to check the process of infiltration. This will sooner or later change political equations in the State. Even though the Supreme Court's decision is bound to make the process of detection and deportation easier but concerted efforts must be made by all sections of the Assamese society to tackle the problem with seriousness. The problem of illegal immigration for its solution also demands that the security and administrative agencies become serious in its task of acting on the illegal immigrants. Identifying these people and deporting them is not an easy goal. This is a serious task for which the concerned agencies and authorities need political support. Political parties both at the State and at the national level should keep national interest in mind and help the security and police departments to perform their goal in a dispassionate manner and rise above communal considerations.

After a detail study / analysis of the nature of immigration problem in Assam it becomes imperative to embark on the core of the present study i.e. how has the influx of immigrants from Bangladesh resulted in the problem of identity crisis among the local population of the State of Assam and resulted in agitation against the foreigners. The identity crisis of Assam is a complex problem engulfing social, political and economic dimensions within itself. Whether such a crisis exists or had existed is not the issue but the very fact that the immigrants in Assam had literally dispossessed the Assamese from various sectors of the state's economy had created a problem of survival and livelihood for the local Assamese. This obviously had resulted in a feeling of frustration among them and the only viable option before them was to solve their recurrent economic problems through political mobilization resulting in anti-foreigner movement and its associated militancy. A rational analysis of this movement should begin with the socio-economic issues involved in creating the crisis ridden situation in the State. As in other economies the economy of Assam also consists of two main planks: agriculture (primarily tea, rice, and jute cultivation) and industries (including mining plywood, oil industry and petroleum sectors). The nature and absorbing capacity of agriculture in the State during the days of independence was such that it could absorb the immigrants but in the arena of white-collar jobs both in

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the private and public sectors there emerged a stiff competition between the local Assamese and the immigrants resulting in inter-ethnic tensions. Both in the sphere of agriculture and white-collar jobs the Assamese found the Bengalis its main competitors and hence the Bengalis since the beginning became the target of attack. Assam's economy growing at a snail's space was already stagnated in the years after independence. When Mizoram and Meghalaya were carved out of the State the crisis compounded further. The anti-foreigner movement in Assam had its root in the sharp contrast between an increase in population growth of the State and the lack of employment opportunities in the public sector. Since 1970's there was an unusual rise in the growth of population in Assam resulting in an increasing pressure on land. Such a pressure when continues for years is bound to result in economic and social tensions as was the case in Assam.

Majority of the people of Assam live in the rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. With limited land available for purposes of agriculture an increase of pressure on land (because of high population's growth) is bound to result in agrarian unrest. This is what happened in Assam particularly since the 1970's. Since then and mainly during the anti-foreigner movement in the late seventies Assam witnessed large-scale agitation for the occupation of land followed by cultivation of forest areas and clearing of land owned by the government. Unprogressive land laws passed by successive Assam governments and frustration among the landless peasants also resulted in agitation like situation in the State. After the start of the anti-foreigner movement in 1979 the confrontation over land policy took a turn for the worst as a large section of the peasantry were Bangladeshis. As Assam predominantly has a rural population, as such any agitation is bound to be associated with the prime component of agricultural like i.e., LAND. Assam has a heterogeneous society "Land" in Assam is used in a broad sense it does not merely stand for a piece of earth. For the inhabitants of Assam land is the most essential element of their 'being'. It denotes their present, future employment avenues and jobs as well. As such any reduction in their already scarce resource was not to be tolerated by them and hence the mighty movement which took place against the Bangladeshi immigrants who were posing a threat to their sense of being. The Assamese middle class played an important role in articulating the grievances of the Assamese people. As this class emerged out of western education, their interests came into direct conflict with the Bengali middle class who had exercised a strong hold over the administration during the initial years of the British rule.

The Assamese middle class had strong rural roots because of which they had maintained strong ties with the peasantry. This class had people who had immense landed property. Infact during the Assam movement this class played a very crucial role as it was a combination of diverse people, the caste Hindus and the tribal and other ethnic groups. It was the Assamese middle class who along with the peasant section of the population had realized that the economic backwardness of Assam was proving detrimental for the Assamese society. The anti-foreigner agitation in Assam significantly created "a growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation on a large scale comparable to and sometimes even worse than in the pre-independence days."<sup>2</sup> One significant aspect of the Assam agitation was the involvement of the peasantry in a very big way. This aspect of the movement goes on to prove that it had a wide impact throughout Assam, not only in the urban areas but also in the rural areas. Lakhs of peasants had participated in the movement. The peasantry even did not hesitate to oppose the 1983 elections which had taken place during the ongoing movement. What gave momentum to the peasant participation in the Assam agitation was the immense impoverishment of the peasant resulting from large scale transfer of land from the poor indigenous peasants to the immigrant illegal Bangladeshi. Continuous and unchecked flow of infiltrators and their occupation of land caused immense misery

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and dissatisfaction among the Assamese peasantries. What added to their misery was the Assam Tenancy act of 1971 which enabled the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to become legal owners of the land which they had continuously occupied for three years. All the above factors created a favorable condition for the immigrants of Bangladesh to not only settle in the plain areas of the state but also the tribal belts were not spared by them.

**CONCLUSION:**

Assam has been the most populous state of northeast in the post-colonial period. The Assamese society has been extraordinarily plural in nature. Multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi class, multi-caste and multi-lingual has been its dominant characteristic feature since ages. Assam had a heterogeneous population, but Assamese was the major national group. From an economic, social point of views, Assam has never been a happy state. Being a border state, its economic development has always taken a backseat and the political leaders both at the state and at the central level had not done much to push the state from its position of perpetual economic backlog. Such a situation has made the state perpetually vulnerable to numerous kinds of conflict, violence and militancy. Assam has always been a resourceful state. Natural resources are found in abundance in the state but ironically enough the state has always lagged behind in the process of economic growth. A higher rate of economic growth necessitates a high rate of savings and a greater degree of social metamorphoses which may impose greater adversities on various social groups or the society as a whole. Poor / skewed economic development combined with extensive pressure on land had created in Assam a disgruntled society. The problem had become all the more acute with the problem of immigration assuming dangerous proportions. Henceforth, Assam, the peace-loving state took recourse to the path of giving a political colour to its economic problems. In the process, bringing into the state a long period of agitation followed by militancy and of course violence.

**FOOTNOTES:**

1. Srikanth H. 'Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam' *Economic and Pol. Weekly*, Vol. 35, No-47 (Nov 18-24, 2000), p. 4118.
2. MisraTilottama, 'Assam, A colonial Hinterland,' *Economic and Political weekly*, August 9, 1980, p. 1358  
Ibid, p. 292.

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1. William E. Lipsky, "Comparative Approaches to the Study of Revolution. Historiographic Essay" *The Review of Politics*, 38 (October 1976), pp. 495-496
2. Parvin Monoucher, 'Economic Determinants of Political Unrest' *An Econometric Approach*, Vol.17, No.2, June 1973, Sage Publications, p.273.
3. Ibid, p. 292.
4. Srikanth H. 'Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam' *Economic and Pol. Weekly*, Vol. 35, No-47 (Nov 18-24, 2000), p. 4118
5. India : Lok Sabha Debate, 16<sup>th</sup> Session, 18-27 May, 1976 (New Delhi : Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1976) pp 109-111, These Acts were followed by the Assam State Acquisition of Land belonging to Religious and charitable institutions of Public Nature Act 1959) and the Assam consolidation of Holding Act 1960.
6. Srikanth H., Militancy and Identity politics in Assam, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 47 (Nov. 18-24, 2000, p. 4121).
7. MisraTilottama, 'Assam, A colonial Hinterland,' *Economic and Political weekly*, August 9, 1980, p. 1358.



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