



IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON ETHNIC RELATIONS IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the impact of migration on ethnic relations in Assam, a region marked by its diverse ethnic composition and history of migration. It investigates how migration, both historical and contemporary, has influenced the socioeconomic, cultural, and political dynamics between indigenous communities and migrant populations. Using a mixed-methods approach, including historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and survey data, the paper examines key migration waves, such as those during the partition of India and the Bangladesh liberation war, and their effects on ethnic identity, resource competition, and social cohesion. Findings reveal that migration has significantly altered Assam's demographic landscape, often leading to tensions over land, language, and political representation. However, it has also fostered instances of cultural exchange and coexistence. The paper highlights the role of government policies, civil society, and ethnic organizations in mediating these relations and addresses the challenges of ensuring equitable development and social harmony. The study also analyzes the role of policy frameworks and civil society initiatives in managing migration-induced challenges.

Keywords: *Migration, Ethnic Relations, Assam, Indigenous Communities, Social Cohesion.*

INTRODUCTION

Assam, a northeastern State of India, is characterized by its rich ethnic diversity and complex history of migration. The region has witnessed significant population movements over centuries, driven by factors such as colonial labor policies, partition-induced displacement, and economic migration (Baruah, 1999). These migration waves have profoundly shaped Assam's demographic, cultural, and political landscape, making it a unique case study for understanding the interplay between migration and ethnic relations. The state is home to numerous indigenous

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communities, including the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, and Ahom, alongside migrant populations such as Bengali Hindus and Muslims, Nepalis, and others. This diversity, while enriching, has also led to tensions over resources, identity, and political representation (Das, 2012).

The importance of studying migration's impact on ethnic relations in Assam lies in its implications for social cohesion, governance, and development. Migration has often been a contentious issue in the region, with indigenous communities perceiving it as a threat to their cultural identity and economic resources. For instance, the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) was a direct response to fears of demographic and cultural dilution due to migration (Misra, 2000). Understanding how migration influences ethnic relations is crucial for addressing conflicts, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring sustainable development in a region that has historically been marked by ethnic strife.

The primary objectives of this paper are threefold. First, it seeks to analyze the historical and contemporary patterns of migration in Assam and their socioeconomic and cultural impacts. Second, it aims to examine how migration has influenced ethnic identity, intergroup relations, and political dynamics. Third, it explores the role of policy and civil society in managing migration-induced challenges and promoting harmonious ethnic coexistence. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between migration and ethnic relations in Assam.

The significance of this article lies in its potential to inform policy and practice. As migration continues to shape Assam's demographic and cultural fabric, there is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to address the challenges it poses. This study contributes to the broader discourse on migration and ethnicity by offering insights into the unique context of Assam, where historical grievances, cultural diversity, and political aspirations interact. By highlighting the experiences of both indigenous and migrant communities, the paper underscores the importance of inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution in fostering social harmony.

LITERATURE REVIEW



The relationship between migration and ethnic relations has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, particularly in regions marked by demographic diversity and historical population movements. Existing research on migration and ethnic relations in Assam has primarily focused on the historical, political, and socioeconomic dimensions of migration and its impact on indigenous communities. Scholars such as Baruah (1999) have highlighted how colonial-era migration policies, particularly introduction of tea plantation labor, laid the foundation for contemporary ethnic tensions. Similarly, Das (2012) has examined the role of migration in shaping political movements, emphasizing how demographic changes have fueled demands for autonomy and resource control among indigenous groups. These studies provide valuable insights into the structural and historical factors that have influenced ethnic relations in Assam.

Key theories and frameworks related to migration and ethnicity offer a broader lens for understanding these dynamics. The concept of "ethnic competition theory," for instance, posits that migration can intensify competition over resources, leading to conflict or cooperation depending on the context (Olzak, 1992). In Assam, this theory is particularly relevant, as migration has often been perceived as a threat to the economic and cultural interests of indigenous communities. Another important framework is the "social identity theory," which explores how migration can reinforce or challenge ethnic identities by creating in-group and out-group dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In Assam, the politicization of ethnic identities, as seen in movements like the Assam agitation, underscores the relevance of this framework. Additionally, the "plural society model" proposed by Furnivall (1948) provides a useful perspective for understanding how diverse ethnic groups coexist in a shared political and economic space, often with limited social integration.

Despite the richness of existing research, several gaps remain in literature. First, while much attention has been paid to historical migration and its political implications, there is limited empirical research on the contemporary experiences of both indigenous and migrant communities. For example, the socioeconomic integration of recent migrants and their interactions with indigenous groups remain underexplored. Second, existing studies often focus on conflict and tension, overlooking instances of coexistence and collaboration between ethnic groups. This imbalance limits our understanding of the potential for harmonious ethnic relations



in a migration-driven context. Third, there is a need for more interdisciplinary research that combines historical, sociological and policy perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of migration and ethnic relations in Assam. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing nuanced and inclusive approaches to managing migration and fostering social cohesion in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on secondary sources to analyze the impact of migration on ethnic relations in Assam. The methodology involves a systematic review of existing literature, including academic journals, books, government reports, and archival materials. Secondary data sources such as census reports, policy documents, and historical records are utilized to provide a comprehensive understanding of migration patterns and their socio-political implications.

The study begins with a thematic analysis of scholarly works on migration and ethnicity, focusing on Assam's historical and contemporary context. Key themes include the colonial roots of migration, post-partition population movements, and the socioeconomic and cultural impacts of migration on indigenous communities. Government reports and census data are analyzed to trace demographic changes and identify trends in migration and ethnic composition over time.

Archival materials, such as records from the Assam State Archives, are examined to understand the historical context of migration policies and their consequences. Additionally, policy documents and legal frameworks related to migration and ethnic rights are reviewed to assess the role of governments in shaping ethnic relations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MIGRATION IN ASSAM

Assam's history of migration is deeply intertwined with its socio-political and economic evolution, shaping its demographic and cultural landscape over centuries. Migration patterns in Assam can be traced back to the pre-colonial era, but they intensified during the British rule and continued to evolve post-independence. The colonial administration's introduction of tea plantations in the mid-19th century marked the beginning of organized migration, as laborers from central and eastern India were brought in to work in the tea estates (Sharma, 2009). This influx of migrant workers laid the foundation for Assam's multi-ethnic society, but it also sowed



the seeds of ethnic tensions, as indigenous communities began to perceive migration as a threat to their land and resources.

In the early 20th century, migration patterns were further influenced by the British policy of encouraging agricultural settlement in Assam. Bengali Hindu farmers from present-day Bangladesh were incentivized to migrate and cultivate fertile lands, leading to significant demographic changes (Baruah, 1999). This period also saw the migration of Nepali graziers, who were brought in to manage livestock in the region. These migrant groups, each with distinct ethnic and cultural identities, contributed to Assam's diversity but also created complex intergroup tensions. The Bengali Hindus, for instance, were often seen as competitors for land and political influence, while the Nepali community maintained a relatively distinct cultural identity.

The partition of India in 1947 marked a turning point in Assam's migration history. The creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) led to a massive influx of Hindu refugees into Assam, fleeing religious persecution and communal violence. This wave of migration further altered the demographic balance, exacerbating tensions between indigenous communities and migrants. The situation was compounded by the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which triggered another large-scale migration of refugees, both Hindu and Muslim, into Assam. The long-term settlement of these migrants, particularly in the char (riverine) areas, became a contentious issue, fueling demands for stricter immigration controls and protection of indigenous rights.

Post-independence, internal migration within India also played a significant role in shaping Assam's demographic profile. The construction of infrastructure projects, such as roads and railways, attracted laborers from other States, while economic opportunities in urban centers like Guwahati drew migrants from across the country. Additionally, the implementation of the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s led to the migration of agricultural workers from States like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, further diversifying Assam's population.

Key migrant groups in Assam include Bengali Hindus and Muslims, Nepalis, and Hindi-speaking communities from northern India. Each group has contributed to the region's cultural and economic fabric but has also been at the center of ethnic conflicts. For instance, the Bengali



Muslim community, often referred to as “Miya,” has faced significant marginalization and stigmatization, despite their long-standing presence in the region (Ahmed, 2010). Similarly, the Nepali community, while culturally distinct, has integrated into Assam’s agrarian economy but remains politically underrepresented.

Historical events such as the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) and the subsequent Assam Accord of 1985 highlight the political ramifications of migration. The agitation, led by indigenous groups, demanded the detection and deportation of undocumented migrants, reflecting deep-seated anxieties about demographic change and cultural erosion (Baruah, 1999). The Assam Accord sought to address these concerns by establishing cut-off dates for identifying illegal migrants, but its implementation has been fraught with challenges, leaving the issue unresolved.

In recent years, migration has continued to shape Assam’s socio-political landscape, with debates over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) reigniting tensions. The NRC, aimed at identifying undocumented migrants, has been criticized for excluding many long-term residents, while the CAA, which offers citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from neighboring countries, has been seen as discriminatory and exclusionary (Chaudhury, 2019). These developments underscore the enduring impact of migration on Assam’s ethnic relations and political dynamics. Thus, Assam’s history of migration is a complex tapestry of economic, political, and social factors. From colonial labor policies to post-partition refugee in flows and contemporary debates over citizenship, migration has been a defining feature of the region’s identity. Understanding this historical context is essential for addressing the challenges of ethnic relations and fostering inclusive development in Assam.

IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

Migration has had profound socioeconomic effects on Assam’s indigenous communities, often leading to competition over resources and economic opportunities. The influx of migrants, particularly in rural areas, has intensified pressure on land, with indigenous groups such as the Bodo and Mising expressing concerns over the loss of ancestral lands to settlers (Bhattacharyya, 2018). This competition has exacerbated economic disparities, as migrant communities often engage in agricultural practices that yield higher productivity, leaving indigenous farmers at a



disadvantage. Additionally, the labor market has been affected, with migrants often willing to work for lower wages, further marginalizing local workers. These socioeconomic tensions have fueled resentment and, in some cases, violent conflicts, as seen in the Bodoland conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s.

Cultural and linguistic changes due to migration have also significantly impacted ethnic relations in Assam. The dominance of Bengali language and culture in certain regions, particularly in the Barak Valley, has led to fears of cultural erosion among indigenous groups (Gohain, 2011). This has prompted movements for the preservation of native languages, such as Assamese and Bodo, and the promotion of indigenous cultural practices. However, migration has also facilitated cultural exchange, with festivals, cuisines, and traditions from migrant communities becoming part of Assam's multicultural fabric. For instance, the Bihu festival now incorporates elements from Bengali and Nepali cultures, reflecting a blend of traditions.

Case studies of ethnic tensions or coexistence in migrant-dominated areas reveal a complex picture. In regions like Dhubri and Goalpara, where migrant populations are significant, tensions over land and political representation have often flared up. Conversely, in areas like Guwahati, the state's largest city, migration has fostered a more cosmopolitan environment, with diverse ethnic groups coexisting and collaborating economically and socially. These contrasting scenarios highlight the dual impact of migration, which can both divide and unite communities depending on the context.

ROLE OF MIGRATION IN SHAPING ETHNIC IDENTITY

Migration has played a pivotal role in shaping and reshaping ethnic identities in Assam. For indigenous communities, the presence of migrants has often reinforced a sense of collective identity, as groups like the Bodo and Ahom rally to protect their cultural heritage and political rights (Baruah, 2005). This has led to the revitalization of traditional practices and languages, as seen in the Bodo language movement, which successfully campaigned for its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. At the same time, migration has led to the formation of new ethnic alliances and divisions. For instance, the shared experiences of marginalization among indigenous groups have fostered solidarity, as seen in the formation of organizations like



the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). Conversely, migration has also deepened divisions, as indigenous groups and migrants often perceive each other as competitors rather than collaborators.

Migration has also politicized ethnic identities, with issues like land rights, language, and citizenship becoming central to political discourse. The Assam Agitation and the subsequent Assam Accord are prime examples of how migration has been used to mobilize ethnic groups politically (Misra, 2000). More recently, debates over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have further politicized ethnic identities, with indigenous groups viewing these measures as crucial for protecting their interests.

POLICY AND GOVERNANCE RESPONSES

Government policies addressing migration and ethnic relations in Assam have evolved over time, reflecting the region's complex socio-political dynamics. The Assam Accord of 1985, a landmark agreement, sought to address the issue of illegal migration by establishing cut-off dates for identifying and deporting undocumented migrants (Baruah, 1999). However, its implementation has been inconsistent, leading to lingering tensions. More recently, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have sparked intense debate, with indigenous groups viewing the NRC as a tool to protect their interests and the CAA as a threat to their demographic and cultural identity (Chaudhury, 2019). These policies highlight the challenges of balancing migration control with the protection of minority rights.

Civil society and ethnic organizations have played a crucial role in managing ethnic relations in Assam. Groups like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) have been instrumental in advocating for indigenous rights and raising awareness about the impacts of migration (Das, 2012). These organizations have also facilitated dialogue between communities, promoting coexistence and conflict resolution. However, their efforts are often constrained by political polarization and resource limitations.

The effectiveness of legal and institutional frameworks in addressing migration-related challenges remains mixed. While initiatives like the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) have provided a platform for indigenous groups to assert their autonomy, they have also been



criticized for failing to address deeper issues of resource allocation and political representation (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Strengthening these frameworks requires greater inclusivity and transparency to ensure that all communities benefit equitably.

CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

Ethnic polarization and conflict due to migration remain significant challenges in Assam. The perception of migrants as a competitor for resources and political power has fueled resentment and, in some cases, violence have also occurred (Gohain, 2011). This polarization undermines social cohesion and hampers efforts to build a unified regional identity.

Challenges to social cohesion and integration are further exacerbated by economic disparities and cultural differences. Migrant communities often face marginalization, while indigenous groups feel their cultural identity is under threat (Sharma, 2009). Bridging these divides requires targeted policies that promote economic development and cultural exchange.

The implications for Assam's demographic and political future are profound. Continued migration could further alter the region's ethnic composition, potentially reshaping political dynamics and governance structures (Misra, 2000). Addressing these challenges demands a holistic approach that balances migration management with inclusive development, ensuring a harmonious and prosperous future for all communities in Assam.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the multifaceted impact of migration on ethnic relations in Assam, highlighting the historical, socioeconomic, and political dimensions of this complex issue. Key findings reveal that migration has significantly shaped Assam's demographic and cultural landscape, often leading to competition over resources, ethnic polarization, and political mobilization. While migration has contributed to economic growth and cultural exchange in some areas, it has also exacerbated tensions between indigenous communities and migrant populations, as seen in conflicts over land, language, and political representation. The study underscores the dual role of migration as both a unifying and divisive force, with its outcomes varying across different regions and communities.



The implications for future research are vast. There is a need for more in-depth studies on the contemporary experiences of both indigenous and migrant communities, particularly in urban areas where migration has fostered greater diversity and interaction. Additionally, interdisciplinary research that combines historical, sociological, and policy perspectives can provide a more holistic understanding of migration's impact on ethnic relations. Exploring the role of gender, youth, and digital media in shaping ethnic identities and intergroup dynamics also presents a promising avenue for future inquiry.

Policy recommendations emerging from this study emphasize the importance of inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution. Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, such as the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), is crucial for addressing the grievances of indigenous communities while ensuring the rights of migrants. Policies that promote economic development, cultural preservation, and social integration can help mitigate ethnic tensions and foster coexistence. For instance, initiatives that support indigenous languages, education, and livelihoods can empower local communities, while programs that encourage dialogue and collaboration between ethnic groups can build trust and mutual understanding.

This, addressing the challenges posed by migration in Assam requires a balanced and inclusive approach that recognizes the legitimate concerns of all stakeholders. By fostering dialogue, promoting equitable development, and strengthening governance, Assam can navigate its complex ethnic landscape and build a more harmonious and prosperous future for all its inhabitants.

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CITE THE ARTICLE

Saikia, S. (2025). Impact of migration on ethnic relations in Assam. *Don Bosco International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(1)
