



The Evolution of Migration in the Barak Valley: Context, Challenges, and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Migration, a complex and universal reality, has significantly influenced the trajectory of human history, impacting individuals, communities, and states worldwide. Defined as the movement or relocation of people from one place to another, migration shapes the economic, cultural, and demographic landscape of both origin and destination regions. This research focuses on the Barak Valley, a diverse and culturally rich region in the northeastern state of Assam, which includes the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi. Over the years, migration has played a crucial role in shaping the cultural, social, and economic identity of Barak Valley. This study aims to explore the historical context and patterns of migration in the Barak Valley region. Additionally, this research seeks to examine the modern-day realities of migration in the Barak Valley, highlighting its complexities, challenges, and opportunities.

Keywords: Migration, Barak valley, Bengali and East Pakistan.

Introduction

Migration has profoundly shaped the course of human history, influencing the destiny of individuals, communities, and states globally. The transfer of population from one region to another region is a worldwide phenomenon with far-reaching repercussions. This process resulted in a complex interplay of demographic, cultural, political and economic transformations, affecting not only the individuals who migrate but also the region they leave and the destination they move to, resulting in a dynamic transformation of societies.

The Barak valley, a diverse and culturally rich region is located in the north-eastern state of Assam. Over the years, Migration has been a powerful catalyst in shaping the cultural, social and economic identity of Barak Valley. This region of Barak Valley, which encompasses the districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi has experienced multiple waves of migration that have played a pivotal role in shaping its identity and development over the years. During the pre-colonial era, the region's fertile land and strategic geographical location of Barak Valley attracted people from various distinct and diverse parts of the country. During the British Colonial rule, the setting up of tea plantations in the region of Barak Valley led to an huge influx of labourers and workers from different parts of India. In this era, Migration continues to play a significant and influential role in shaping the fate of Barak Valley.

Objectives:

- To examine the historical context and patterns of migration in the Barak Valley region
- To examine the repercussions and modern-day realities of migration in the Barak Valley, shedding light on its complexities, challenges, and opportunities.

Historical background of the migration in Barak valley

The Barak Valley region, located in the southern part of Assam has experienced the issue of migration throughout the years. Migration in Barak valley region has greatly influenced the social, economic, cultural and political landscape of this region. The region of Barak valley has been a melting pot of various distinct cultural, ethnic, linguistic groups and communities. Here an overview of the historical background of the situation of migration in Barak valley region.

Pre-colonial period

Before the entry of British, the Barak Valley region was home to diverse indigenous groups and communities. In the pre-colonial period, the Barak valley region mostly inhabited by the indigenous groups and tribes like – kuki, Dimasa, and hamar. The Dimasa recognised themselves as the earliest known inhabitants, and played a crucial role in the preliminary history of this region.

The Barak valley's strategic and geographical location made it a ideal passage for migration and trade. During the ancient period, the rich cultivable land and abundant water resources attracted the people to migrate in this region. This migration resulted in the settlement of new tribes and communities along with the existing ones. The process of migration during the pre-colonial period was a complicated phenomenon affected by a number of factors including cultural, religious, environmental, agriculture and others. The migration had a far-reaching impact on the cultural and demographic landscape of the region.

Colonial period

The Barak valley region in Assam witnessed a significant amount of migration during the colonial period. During colonial rule, the Barak valley region faced major demographic and economic changes due to the policies introduced by the British administration. The policies and guidelines introduced by the colonial administration encouraged migration from the various parts of the country including the settlement of Bengali Hindu and Muslim workers and labourers in this region. The tea plantations initiated by the British in Assam further encouraged migration, as labourers from central India migrated in this region to work on these tea plantations. The development of roads railways and infrastructure especially the silchar-haflong railway lines increased connectivity and enhanced easier migration in the Barak valley region. The migration during the colonial administration transformed the social, cultural and linguistic landscape of the Barak valley region.

Post-colonial period

The partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 is the largest migration of population in the history of human mankind. Some reports suggest that more than 18 million people migrated from one side to another. The region of Barak valley also encountered a huge influx of migrants after the partition of India. Partition between India and Pakistan resulted in a towering influx of people mainly from Bengali speaking communities, who had been forced to leave from Sylhet and other parts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). From 1947 to 1951, more than 1.2 million people migrated from East Pakistan to settle in Assam, out of that, the majority of the portion located in Barak valley. At the height of the twentieth century, economic factors guided migration from East Pakistan to urban centres such as Silchar and Karimganj in the Barak valley region. Migrants looked for better employment possibilities and higher living standards.

In 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War began between East and West Pakistan, leading to a significant influx of refugees entering into India, specifically in the north eastern part of India primarily west Bengal, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. As a result, The region Barak Valley, which shares a long border with Bangladesh (that time East Pakistan), encountered a large amount of migration of people entering into India for seeking safety and shelter. More than 10 million refugees entered into India during that time and around 1.5 million people migrated to Assam. The migration from East Pakistan was mainly forced by reports of brutalities done by the Pakistani army and its associates, including genocides, rapes, and arson. Most of the refugees arrived in the Barak Valley with limited belongings, devastated by their experiences. In between March and December 1971, around 400,000 refugees entered the Barak valley.

The Indian government and local administration set up refugee centres in the Barak Valley region to offer shelter and support to the migrants. Around 14 refugee centres were set up in the region of Barak valley. Largest refugee camp was set up in Silchar accommodating more than 150,000 refugees. The region's local residents also came forward to support and provide needful assistance to the refugees. Migration during the time of Bangladesh liberation war 1971, substantially affected the culture and demography of the Barak Valley region. This migration led to the increase of population by around 20% in this region at that period. The migration significantly affected the political dynamics of Assam. As a result, The Assam movement (1979-1985) was started mainly with the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and for the protection of the interests of the local people. The legacy of the migration in this region carries on to shape the social, economic and political dynamics of the region.

Effects of migration in the Barak valley region

Demographic changes:

The rise of Migration has resulted in a substantial transformation in the demographic attributes of the region, marked by the changes in the size of population, composition, and distribution. As a result of migration it led to the increase of population of the region of Barak valley 50,000 in 1835 to 3,624,599 in 2011. Migration in the region of Barak valley has resulted in a massive increase in the growth rate, from 1.1% in 1951 to 2.5% in 2011. Migration also led to the rapid urbanization of the region of Barak valley. As a result the urban population grew from 10% in 1951 to 35% in 2011. These alterations have played a significant role resulting in demographic shifts which have a significant impact on the social, economic, political landscape of this region.

Economic instability

The partition of India in 1947 resulted in a significant influx of migrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into the region of Barak Valley, putting lots of pressure on the region's natural resources and infrastructure. A significant proportion of those who migrated to Barak Valley region were forced to leave behind their homes, businesses, and livelihoods, resulting in economic turmoil and instability in this region. The rapid increase in population resulted in the soaring unemployment rates and underdevelopment in the region, the local economy has faced a huge challenge to absorb the influx of migrants. The rapid growth of population also puts a significant amount of pressure on the local resources, including water, food, education and healthcare, led to scarcity and inequality in this region. The migration also created a turbulence in the region's economic activities, affecting the agriculture, livelihoods, trade, and commerce, resulting in the economic turmoil and stagnation. Further the 1971 war of independence in Bangladesh worsened these issues, leading to a second wave of migration and displacement in the region of Barak valley. The economic vulnerability that resulted from these incidents has had long-lasting effects on this region, making it more difficult for the region of Barak Valley to achieve sustainable economic progress and development.

Political implications:

The issue of Migration has a far-reaching political consequence, including matters regarding Voting rights, citizenship and political representation. During the early half of 1960s, A major portion of leading political parties, state authorities, and the local residents became more conscious towards the protection of their identities and land rights and started protesting against the Centre's move to safeguard the interest of refugees and other migrants by providing them with citizenship of India up to the Liberation War of 1971. During the late 1970's the Assam movement was started by the students mainly regarding the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in Assam. The movement demanded the detection, deletion, and deportation of the illegal immigrants, who were mainly Bangladeshis, charged with changing the demographic setup of state and providing a serious threat to the cultural and ethnic identity of the indigenous Assamese people. The movement resulted into the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which intended to address the problem of illegal migration in Assam. However, the accord's execution has been controversial, and thus this issue remains unresolved till date.

Security threat:

The region of Barak valley shares a long unfenced and vulnerable border with Bangladesh which facilitates illegal immigration, smuggling, and infiltration, posing a massive security threat to this region. The continuous illegal Migration from Bangladesh has resulted in the escalation of illegal and unlawful practices such as cattle smuggling, infiltration, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling, threatening the regional peace. The regular and unchecked inflow of migration from Bangladesh is transforming the demographic landscape of Barak Valley, posing a great threat to the indigenous culture, language and identity of the people in this region. Change in the demographic landscape of Barak Valley could have significant strategic implications, possibly altering the regional power structure and influencing the political aspect of this region. The prolonged border and river disputes between India and Bangladesh also made the region very crucial for India in terms of security.

Contemporary situation of migration in Barak valley

The present day situation of migration in the Barak Valley region of Assam covers a range of socio-political, cultural, ethnic, economic, and environmental challenges that have widespread implications for the local residents. This region of Barak valley, which includes the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi, has been greatly affected by the execution of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These laws basically try to identify and manage illegal immigration, specially from Bangladesh, but the implementation of these laws resulted in significant instability and uncertainty among the local people.

The NRC, which seeks to verify the citizenship status of residents belonging from Assam, omitted around 1.9 million people from its final list declared in 2019, creating a widespread situation of fear and anxiety among those people who are left out from the list. Majority of these people are now facing judicial battles in court to prove their citizen with the fear of detention and statelessness. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed by the Indian parliament on December 11, 2019, offers a passage to citizenship for non-Muslim

migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, further complicating the socio-political scenario in this region. The CAA act has been categorised as discriminatory by many and has triggered protests and resistance, especially in Assam and also in the regions of the Barak Valley.

The demographic structure of the Barak Valley region is largely Bengali-speaking, with almost 85% of people of this region speaking Bengali according to the 2011 Census. These linguistic and cultural traits frequently clash with the Assamese-speaking population, resulting in ethnic and cultural conflict and tensions in the region. These problems are exacerbated by the political agenda surrounding migration and lead to division and resentment among the local people.

The region of Barak Valley faces serious economic challenges due to the high influx of migrants over the years. This results in high unemployment rates, as far the data published by the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2019-20 shows that the overall unemployment rate of Assam is 8.1%. The inflow of illegal immigrants in this region resulted in intensifying the competition for limited job opportunities, mainly in the agricultural and informal sectors, which traditionally dominate the local residents. This competition results in decreased wages and heightened economic instability and insecurity for both local residents and migrants.

There has been immense strain on public resources and infrastructure due to the excessive influx of migrants in this region is another critical issue. Educational facilities are overcrowded, as illustrated by the pupil-teacher ratio in the primary schools in the Cachar district, which substantially exceeds the national average. Healthcare services also facing a similar strain in this region, the doctor-population ratio in the Barak Valley region is far higher than the recommendation of the World Health Organization. Which resulted in a serious shortage of medical professionals and inadequate healthcare facilities in this region.

Various security measures are being taken to strengthen the India-Bangladesh border to curb the influx of illegal immigration and to enhance border security in this region. Despite the efforts taken to secure the border, its porous nature persists, allowing unchecked crossing that presents a serious amount of threat to regional security. The continuous inflow of migration intensifies environmental stress, characterized by increased deforestation as new arrivals seek to exploit the land for cultivation and residential use. Such activities affect the regional ecological balance and agricultural productivity, posing a significant threat to its sustainability.

Conclusion

The history of migration in Barak Valley is a dynamic and complex phenomenon that reflects the region's important geographical position and its shifting social and economic dynamics. Since ancient times, the Barak Valley region served as a crucial link for cultural and economic exchange, drawing diverse communities and people to this region due to its fertile land and conducive climate. The establishment of tea gardens during the British colonial rule in India had a significant impact on migration trends, as labourers from diverse parts of India came to this region in search of new employment opportunities. The partition of Bengal in 1905, followed by partition of India in 1947 sparked a massive influx of Bengali migrants, transforming the cultural and demographic landscape of the Barak Valley region. In the post-independence era, the region of Barak Valley experienced continued migration, driven by economic prospects and socio-cultural factors. However, the influx of migrants also led to various challenges, such as strained social relations, resource competition, identity and cultural disputes and other issues. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach. Policies must aim at fair resource allocation, social integration and economic development which is beneficial for all. Moreover, upgrading infrastructure and public services can ease the pressure of the growing population in this region. It's also very important to ensure the transparent and effective implementation of the NRC and CAA to maintain trust and peace among communities. By fostering community spirit and enhancing inclusive development, the region of Barak Valley can effectively address the complexities of migration and can build a more peaceful and prosperous future.

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