

Migration, Land, Culture –An Emperical Study in Assam

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Abstract-- The frequency and the size of the migrating movements of population over the historical eras have always been an impressive phenomenon. Voluntarily or forced, people have changed their place of living and work inside and outside the borders of their own countries, hoping to realize some aspirations, hoping in new opportunities or new assurances. The research made in the sphere of historical demography proves the influence of demographical variations, provoked by the phenomenon of migration on the historical development of society through interactions between economic, political and cultural facto. In the context of political, socio-economic and cultural change, the ones that chose to emigrate have faced firstly problems of survival, the need of changing the mentality and traditional costumes, given the requirements of the new societies in which they need to integrate. The process of integration has always been long and sometimes painful, and sometimes disillusionment has crept in besides the personal and Professional realization. Following the studies made, it has been noticed that emigrants are more tolerant toward minorities, toward persons of a different ethnicity or a different religion and more likely to be involved in the political life or in the social-cultural life of the community. At the same time emigrants care more about schooling and are more flexible in their relationships with the members of the family, investing more trust in the children. Migration involves thus all the spheres of human existence: economic, political, religious and cultural, contribution directly or indirectly to the community of the society.

Keywords-- Migration, Land, Culture, Assam, Administration

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Dumitru Sandală: „The migration, as a socio- demographic event, refers to the movement of a person or a social group outside of their original community, in order to change their permanent residency and their usual place of work.”¹ The migration represents a social phenomenon, which grew in size exceedingly in the twentieth century. All along history, the migration was determined either by the desire to conquer new territories, by the desire to have better revenues, to change one’s social statute, to make a family whole again or by desire to know different societies and contemporary civilization.

The developing of the transport and communications industries, which facilitated mobility and long distance communication, have made it possible in the twentieth century, the annual average growth of migration to be 2.6%, compared to a 1.7% average growth of the world population.”²

Ștefan Ștefănescu remarks the fact that “The modifications made in the structure of the population influence the apparition of new phenomena and institutions.” Citing the French historian Marcel Reinhard, Ștefan Ștefănescu proves the importance of the demographic factor, the way in which the modifications made into the structure and movements of population influences the political structure, the administrative organization and the economic-cultural development of society over the historical eras: „Without some density of population the political structure cannot affirm itself, the administrative organization is not doable and the economic-cultural development is unconceivable.”

A migration is generally expected to absorb the cultural rhythms of his new home. Language, culture, social norms and public behavior gradually adjust , while memories and practices of origin recede into the private sphere . This has been the historical pattern across societies that have remained cohesive despite migration. Assam, however, stands out as a striking exception . Here, almost every migrant group seeks not integration but the public retention of its culture of origin. And the political establishment not only accepts this anomaly but actively encourages it in pursuit of numerical advantage . Even the intelligentsia has come to regard this inversion as natural and irreversible.

What makes the situation particularly stark is the element of time. Assam has experienced nearly two hundred years of sustained and large scale migration, beginning in the colonial period and continuing into the present. In most societies , such as long historical span would have produced visible cultural integration and a shared civic identity. In Assam, this has conspicuously not happened. Instead of gradual assimilation into the cultural framework of the land, migration has resulted in the consolidation of parallel cultural spaces that increasingly assert themselves with permanence and confidence in public life.



The problem, however, is not migration itself, nor the desire to preserve cultural memory. It lies in the steady erosion of the primacy of the cultures rooted in the land. Assam has never been culturally monolithic. Alongside Assamese, a range of indigenous and long settled local cultures-Bodo, Karbi, Deuri, Tiwa, Mising, Dimasa, Ahom and others have evolved through shared geography, ecology and historical experience. Together they constitute the civilization framework of the region. Yet, today, it is precisely these local cultures that are expected to endlessly accommodate, while cultures brought through later migration assert themselves unchanged and increasingly dominant in public life.

This reversal did not occur organically. It is the product of a political economy that converts demography into electoral capital. Cultural separation has become politically profitable, while integration offers no immediate reward. Political parties, therefore, encourage cultural parallelism in the name of harmony, mistaking appeasement for inclusiveness. Over time, this abdication has been legitimized by a superficial understanding of multiculturalism, which treats all cultural expressions as equal in public space regardless of their relationship to the land. What is presented as tolerance is in reality a withdrawal of responsibility by the state to protect the cultural ecosystems of the region.

A stable society does not function on unlimited multiculturalism. It functions on integration into a shared public culture, while allowing diversity in private life. In Assam, that shared public culture must necessarily be anchored in the local cultures of the land- Assamese and the indigenous traditions that predate or grew organically within the region. Multiculturalism in the sense of multiple origin cultures enjoying equal public authority can be legitimately claimed only by these indigenous cultures. For migration-origin cultures, the appropriate framework is integration, not parallelism.

Since a mass outflow of later immigrants is neither easy nor realistically possible, the only viable path forward lies in integration rather than displacement. The state must, therefore, take the lead in facilitating the fusion of immigrant communities into the indigenous cultural framework of Assam. Cultural integration, cannot be left to chance, nor can it be outsourced to social goodwill alone. It must be consciously promoted as a matter of public policy with the state clearly prioritizing integration over the encouragement of endless cultural segmentation beyond the indigenous context.

This does not require coercion, but it requires clarity of purpose. The state must proactively remove barriers that prevent migrants from entering local cultural spaces – whether linguistic, institutional or symbolic and replace them with incentive that make participation in local cultures. Without such intervention, two centuries of cultural distance are unlikely to narrow on their own.

Public space offers the clearest evidence of state intent. Today, large segments of Assam's civic landscape – schools, markets, political platforms and even administrative functioning reflect migration routes rather than the land itself. When the languages are absent from institutional life, when regional cultural symbols are marginal in official space and when the knowledge of local history is treated as optional, message is unmistakable. Such signal, repeated over decades, have ensured that even after two hundred years, cultural integration remain elusive.

Language lies at the heart of this crisis. Local languages, particularly Assamese have been reduced to emotive symbols rather than instruments of aspiration. They are invoked in moments of protest but sidelined in pathway of advancement. No language survive in sentiment alone. People adopt languages when they offer access, opportunity and authority, unless functional knowledge of local languages becomes essential for meaningful participation in administration, politics and economic life, integration will remain in abstract ideal rather than a lived reality.

Protecting the local culture is not an act of exclusion, it is an act of constitutional responsibility. Migrants need not abandon their faiths, or family customs. But integration requires learning the languages of the land, participating in its festivals and civic rituals, and accepting its cultural norms in public life. Integration is a social contract, not a unilateral concession by the host society. The intelligent has failed to articulate this distinction with sufficient clarity. By framing the issue as Assamese versus non-Assamese or as tradition versus modernity, it has obscured the real question: whether cultures rooted in the land will continue to define public life, or whether demography arithmetic alone will determine cultural authority.

Assam's future will not be decided by the numbers alone. Cultures endure by shaping norms, institutions and inspirations. The question is not whether Assamese culture in isolation will survive, but whether the plural, layered cultures of this land will retain their centrality in public life.



To arrest the present drift, the state must move from passive tolerance to active integration, affirm the primacy of local cultures in public life and dismantle barriers that have kept communities culturally separate for generations. Only then can coexistence nature into integration and diversity cease to be a euphemism for fragmentation.

In Assam, land has never been a passive object of administrative. It carries memory, livelihood, belonging and authority across generation. Today, land has become the primary language of politics. From eviction drives in riverine tracts to forest land it frames a debate on governance, identity and justice more decisively than any other issue in public life. It is no longer ownership but also how power is exercised, limited and legitimized and how social equilibrium can be maintained amid growing pressure on finite resources. Assam's land question is deeply layered with history. Colonial revenue system prioritized productivity and extraction over social balance, encouraging settlement without recognizing customary ownership or ecological limits. After independence, successive disruptions –partition, the 1971 war, and relentless erosion by the Brahmaputra-placed extra ordinary pressure on fragile land resources. By the late 1970s, these pressures crystallized in the Assam movement, where anxieties over land, identity and political representation fused in to a powerful political current.

Those ambiguities now confront the state with renewed energy. Assam's population density has increased steadily, while habitable and cultivable land has shrunk due to erosion, floods and environmental stress. Official estimated that over 3.5 lakh hectares of forest land remain under encroachment, while informal settlements have expanded along riverbanks and flood prone areas. Thousands are displaced annually by erosion, forcing families into repeated cycles of informal settlement. These conditions generate overlapping claims and legal uncertainty, particularly in char areas, forest fringe and protected belts. In such zones, the line between survival –driven settlement and organized encroachment is often blurred, complicating governance and fuelling social tension. Recent eviction drives must be understood against this backdrop. The objective –reclaiming encroached government and forest land-falls squarely within its constitutional mandate. Unregulated encroachment carries tangible costs. It worsening flooding, disrupts wildlife corridor, degrades common resources, and obstruct planned development. A state committed to ecological security and long term planning cannot allow illegality to harden into permanence. Failure to act also undermines public faith in the rule of law, creating precedent that weaken institutional authority.

Criticism of these operations has been intense and emotionally charged. Detractors argue that enforcement disproportionately affects the poor, turning legal action into social trauma. Images of demolished homes have shaped public perception, reinforcing the impression of the state acting with firmness but insufficient sensitivity. For marginalized families, land is not merely property; it is livelihood, security and dignity. Displacement without credible rehabilitation risks deepening alimentation in a region where land has historically driven political mobilization, mishandled enforcement may therefore generate instability rather than resolution. The counter argument, however, deserves equal attention. To portray all evictions as acts of injustice is to overlook the cumulative damage caused by prolonged encroachment. Forest land occupation, in particular, undermines ecological resilience in a state already vulnerable to climate extremes. Flood mitigation, biodiversity conservation and agricultural stability depend on protecting these spaces. The state has attempted to move away from decades of inertia by linking enforcement with rehabilitation through housing schemes, welfare inclusion and livelihood support.

Public debate is further complicated by the failure to distinguish between forms of encroachment. There is substantive difference between illegal immigration and internal migration, between recent encroachment and long settled populations, and between organized land grabbing and livelihood driven settlement. The experience of Bihari settlers in Kheroni (West Karbi Anglong District) illustrates this complexity. many migrate decades ago as railway workers, industrial labourers or small traders and are now embedded in Assam's economic and social life. Conflating their presence with cross border migration is analytical flawed and administratively counterproductive. Equally significant is the question of constitutional

safeguard their interpretation. Provisions designed to protect indigenous communities and vulnerable areas are sometimes weakened by administrative laxity, while at other times invoked selectivity stretching their original intent. This has fuelled mistrust and allegation of distortion. The challenge before the state is not to dilute constitutional guarantees, but to enforce them with clarity, consistency, and transparency, ensuing that protection is neither politicized nor misused.

These tensions are most visible in sixth schedule areas, where land is inseparable from autonomy and cultural survival. Recent unrest in parts of Karbi-Anglong and adjoining areas demonstrate how administrative action can quickly acquire ethnic over tones., with clashes between local councils, tribal authorities and long settled settlers intensifying concern.

Some fear that strict enforcement threatens long settled non-tribal populations; other argue that any dilution of land protections undermines autonomy itself. Tribal land safeguards are constitutional and non-negotiable, but stability also requires transparent mechanism to distinguish historical settlement from opportunities encroachment, supported by consultation with local councils and communities.

Although defining culture is important, the way in which these model us as humans is more important. Thus, Aurelia Bălan underlined that: The real value of culture is in its relationship with civilization, [...] the substance of culture forms the spirit, its necessities, while the substance of civilization is formed by matter: the biological and the satisfying of its needs. . . . The two components of history, culture and civilization, needs to be then in permanent interaction, similar to the one between soul and body, to condition each other. . . . The civilized human is truly the educated one, the cultured one, the one with self- control and a noble behavior, a nobility acquired through culture, not only by simply descending from a family with noble blood.¹⁷ The case of group migration, or of the existence of a community made by those who previously left, makes the uprooting less painful in the socio-economic and cultural life of the emigrants who reached their new country. In the context of political, socio-economic and cultural change, the ones that chose to emigrate have faced firstly problems of survival, the need of changing the mentality and traditional costumes, given the requirements of the new societies in which they need to integrate. The process of integration has always been long and sometimes painful, and sometimes disillusionment has crept in besides the personal and professional realizations, sometimes sacrifices needing to be done.

II. CONCLUSION

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