

The Brahmaputra valley of India can be compared only with the Indus Valley in its wet agricultural colonization. This sparsely populated rich tract of alluvial land (density: 39 persons per sq. km in 1900-1) of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam was a immediate attraction to the inhabitants of the relatively dense populated Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal). The high fertility of the virgin wet soils and the low rents prevailing at that time induced many farmers from Bangladesh to settle in this valley. Their in-movement was facilitated by the extension of railway links and the opening up of the Brahmaputra river route by steamer services coupled with the availability of cultivable land on generally favourable geographical as well as social conditions.

During 1891-1901, the influx of settlers into Assam was rather slow. The 1911 census reported a wave of settlers modifying the density and distribution of population in few districts of Assam. The growth of population in Assam rose from 1881 to 1931 was more than 100%. This has extensively affected the existing distribution pattern of the population. The census recorded a total of 118000 persons born outside Assam, of whom 77000 were from the districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur in East Bengal. Immigrants to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam from East Bengal increased from 120000 in 1911 to 301000 in 1921, to 496000 in 1931. Of these 37000, 172000 and 221000 respectively were from Mymensingh alone. In 1951 just after the partition of India, out of the total population of 6.7 million in Assam Valley rose to 2.6 million of which 1.1 million were classified as born outside the valley. It is also to be noted that most of the settlers were Muslims, in consequent to the indigenous population comprised of Hindus. During the 1951-58, the number of Hindu refugees from East Bengal to Assam stood at 4, 87,000 and population of Assam rose to 6, 28,249 according to the Census of 1961. Consequently, the perennial problem of communal disturbances took place in Assam. A fresh exodus of Hindu migrants poured in 1964 and then the number of Hindu migrants rose to 10, 68,455 in 1968. Most of these Hindu migrants belonged to middle class and urban minded and settled for white collar jobs in the urban areas. The abnormally high growth in the number of Muslim population in Assam during 1951-61 (39% as against 21% in East Pakistan) substantiates the fact that Muslim immigration into Assam continued unabated even after the creation of East Pakistan. According to Union Home Ministry Report, 1993 a total of 11.14 lakh migrants from erstwhile East Pakistan entered into India in the intervening period of 1964-71. With Assam having 300 km open border, one can easily say that a major chunk of these infiltrators sneaked into Assam. The magnitude of immigration during 1961-71 was of the order of 15, 03,543 persons. According to the 1991 census the population reports more than 40 percent of Assam's population is thought to be of migrant origin, of which major chunk of them are migrants from Bangladesh.

The large segment of the Muslim migrants from Bangladesh have settled in the *Char* (new alluvium/ small islands) areas of Brahmaputra Valley and have engaged themselves in agricultural activities since most of them were farmers by profession. Their migration to Assam was also to look for fertile lands for cultivation; since the pressure on agricultural land in Bangladesh was tremendous due to the high growth of population and the available arable land could not sustain them any more. Therefore, many of the farmers migrated to India and in particular to Assam. They also had expertise in deep tube well irrigation and HYV rice and wheat cultivation. The Brahmaputra valley was found to be ideal for such crops which were less liable to damage due to flood or river erosion. Thus most of the Muslim farmer migrants from Bangladesh settled in the valley and started practicing wet rice cultivation and vegetable farming. In the labour market their demand was increased among the indigenous cultivators due to their skill in the field and dedication to hard work. Consequently fresh migration of farm labourer started pouring into Assam from neighbouring Bangladesh. This has certainly changed the agricultural production and productivity pattern of Assam and then the Brahmaputra valley became one of the highest producers of rice and vegetable in the country. Darrang district alone shows significant increase in the yield of food grains production. Area under cultivation too increased from 1.88 lakh hectares in 1961 to 2.75 hectares in 1981 totaling a 48% increase in a span of 20 years. Later such labour force was never restricted to the agricultural sector alone. Their demand for work in the urban areas particularly in the construction and semi-skilled sector too increased significantly.

However, by making immigration labour easily available, the process of unhindered immigration reduced the incentives to technological change. This is less likely if directly or indirectly immigration raises production costs. This would occur if increased demand results in a

shortage of productive factors other than labour. This would also result from increased wage claims intended to compensate for price increase. Immigration also adds to pressure on other government expenditures. Immigration by encouraging economic growth and raising per capital income resulted in increased tax revenue which could have been used to finance both aggregate and per capita government expenditure, which is not the case in Assam. Though immigration creates problem, it also needs appreciation particularly in its rural economy, where their contribution is very significant. According to the 1971 census report, 92 per cent of the population of the state is rural and 77 per cent of the working force is engaged in agriculture.

Immigration has contributed a large chunk of population in Assam in two ways- direct addition to the population and by raising the natural rate of increase of population through higher fertility rate and preponderance of persons of the reproductive age group, in which fertility rate of Bangladesh is traditionally high. The long continuous immigration of farm labourers from Bangladesh is the results of the operation of several pull and push forces. In the early stage of the process the low density of population in the Bramaputra valley, abundance of virgin fertile land, open cumulative *chars* and the benign land tenure system acted as powerful pull forces while mounting pressure on land, the oppressive Zamindari system, provided equally powerful push forces.

The main objective of the study is to evaluate the impact of Bangladesh immigrants on the development of a labour market that was externally induced. The study also intends to examine the validity of the claim that the continued influx of labour from Bangladesh has indeed depressed the application of modern technology into agriculture. A very important objective of the paper is also to understand the occupational structure and mobility of the non-migrant ethnic Assamese people.

The study is based on data available in census reports and other government reports. Data has also been collected from the field through a socio-economic survey of the households from a selected villages. For the sake of comparison, field data has been collected from villages in an area dominated by immigrant population and also from an area where the impact of immigrant population is only marginal.