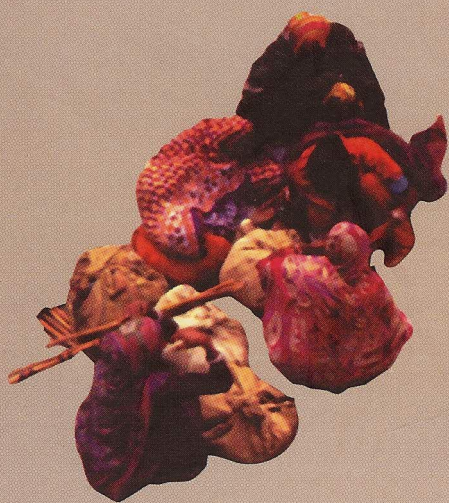


**ILLEGAL
MIGRATIONS
and the
NORTH-EAST**



SIBOPADA DE

The book unfolds different contours of the most controversial unauthorised migrations from Bangladesh to the north-eastern states of India. The book is divided in two parts. In the first part, one will find details of the anti-alien movement in Assam. The author tries to analyse why all the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh denied infiltration into Indian territory, why Bangladesh need a lebensraum in the north-east of India, why all successive ministries in Assam virtually failed to implement the Assam Accord and minimise the flow of illegal migrations, and finally what should be the reasonable approach to contain the foreign nationals issue in the north-eastern states.

In the second part, the author highlights the peculiar impacts of the illegal migrations in Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The nature and intensity of the issue differ from one another. State-wise study has been made by the author to acquaint the readers with the peculiarities of the respective states. It also suggests remedial measures to address and contain the tangled situation in the north-east.

The book may help Dhaka and New Delhi to review and synchronise their understanding of the issues to ease-off the tense situation in the north-eastern parts of India in the light of the findings and analyses of the book.

Born of humble parents in 1935, **Sibopada De** is a self-made person. While earning for his family, he simultaneously did his B.A., M.A. (History) and D.Phil. (Economic History) from the Gauhati University. He began his career as a lecturer in History in Cachar College, Silchar wherefrom he retired as HOD in 1995.

He edited "News & Views: From the Past" for twelve consecutive years in the *Assam Tribune*, and compiled biographies of the Assam leaders in the dictionary of National Biographies. His research papers on the sensitive issues of Assam were published in many books and journals. The Government of Assam requisitioned his services for compiling Political History of Assam (1826-1947). He was the co-author and editor of its Vol. II & III published by the Govt. of Assam. He also worked as a Senior Research Fellow in the CRIBR under the aegis of the MEA. He also has to his credit contributions in the *Statesman*, the *Telegraph* and the *Indian Defence Review*. The English rendering of a Bengali book "The Politics of Awami League" was done by him at the request of its author Ghulam Akbar Chowdhury, the most volatile personality behind the political panorama of modern Bangladesh. He has worked as a Project Fellow of the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata.

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ILLEGAL MIGRATIONS AND THE NORTH-EAST

A STUDY OF MIGRANTS FROM BANGLADESH



SIBOPADA DE

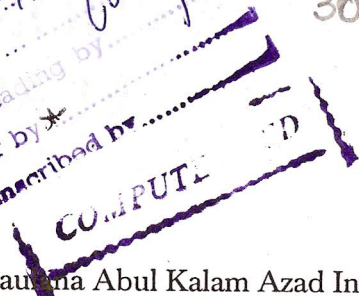
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PREFACE

The idea of a book on the "infiltration" of Bangladeshi nationals into the north-eastern states of India and Assam in particular was conceived while I was editing the volumes of the Political History of Assam inside the secretariat of the Assam's Chief Minister and anti-alien agitation under the students leadership was going on simultaneously outside the secretariat campus. More than a decade later I was encouraged to take up the work when as a senior research Associate in the centre for research in Indo-Bangladesh Relations under the aegis of the Ministry of External Affairs I got enough opportunity to consult Bangladeshi documents and interact with Bangladeshis then visiting India for various reasons. Finally in 1999 Dr. Jayanta Kumar Ray, a centenary Professor of Calcutta University offered me the present opportunity to bring out the book from the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, where he was then acting as its honorary director. This is in short the background of the work.

In the present work I have dispassionately endeavoured to outline objectively and concisely the complex contours of illegal migrations from Bangladesh to north-eastern states of India from 1971 to 1999. Five out of seven states in the north-east have been directly affected by the out-migrations from Bangladesh. These states are Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Needless to mention north-east's premier state Assam was badly affected by unauthorised migrations from Bangladesh. Anti-alien students' movement continued

there for seven years from 1979 to 1985. The situation that emerged in Assam turned into a national issue and needed solution at the national level. On the other hand the nature and intensity of the movements in four other states not only differ from Assam but differ also from one another. Each state has its peculiarities. This demanded state-wise treatment in the present work. The first part of this book therefore outlines Assam's problems independently with fuller details; while the second part will focus issues in the remaining states. The book may help Dhaka and New Delhi to review and synchronise their understanding in the light of the findings and analyses of the work and ease-off the tensed situation prevailing today in the north-eastern part of India. Bangladesh may well fathom its own responsibility in the matter of intensifying the north-eastern ethnic issues for its continual demographic invasion in the background of the assistance it once received from the Indian people and the government to protect its own language, culture and ethnic identity against the West Pakistani aggression. The same reciprocity is expected from Bangladesh to help Indian government overcome the north-eastern ethnic imbroglio.

An attempt has been made to answer a few intractable questions like (i) why have all Prime Ministers of Bangladesh so far denied infiltration of any kind from their country into the Indian territories; (ii) why do Bangladesh need a *lebensraum*; (iii) why did the successive ministries in Assam fail to implement the Assam Accord and minimise the flow of illegal migrations and (iv) what should be the reasonable approach to contain the foreign nationals' problem in the north-eastern territories of India.

It is to be borne in mind that the foreign nationals' issue in the north-east and Assam in particular is too sensitive and controversial. It can also be viewed differently. The book will certainly raise quite a number of questions answers of which will come out through further discussions and investigations.

Yet, should the contents of this book be useful in understanding the foreign nationals' issue in the north-east the efforts devoted by me would be considered amply rewarded.

I am grateful to the reporters of the *Statesman*, the *Telegraph*, the *Assam Tribune* and the *Sentinel*. It would have been quite difficult for me to reconstruct the complex contours of the ethnic issues without their reportage.

I express my profound gratitude to Dr. (Professor) Devendra Kaushik, Chairman of the Executive Council of the Institute, Dr. (Professor) Mahavir Singh, Director of the centre, to help me survive after recovery from cancer.

Finally, opinions expressed in this book are entirely mine and the Institute is in no way responsible for them.

Sibopada De

ABBREVIATIONS

AASU	All Assam Students' Union.
ADC	Autonomous District Council.
AGP	Asom Gono Parishad.
Albadar	Pakistani Collaborators.
APHLC	All Party Hill Leaders' Conference
ATPLO	Army of Tripura People's Liberation Organisation
ATTF	All Tripura Tiger Force.
Bangabandhu	Friend of the people of Bengal.
Bideshi	Foreigner.
IPFT	Indigenous People's Front of Tripura.
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party.
Kafers	Infidels or non-believers in Islam.
Lachit Sena	A militia formed by some angry Assamese youth after the name of Assam's illustrious General Lachit Barphukan who successfully repelled the Mughal invaders from the Ahom kingdom.
Lokpriya	Beloved to the people.
NEC	North East Council.
MNC	National Minority Committee.
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland.
Rajakars	Pakistani Collaborators.
TNV	Tripura National Volunteers.
TRA	Tripura Resurrection Army.
TUJS	Tripura Upajati Juva Samity.
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam.
UNDP	United Nation's Development Programme.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the great partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 the present north-eastern part of India comprised the province of Assam, two princely states, Manipur and Tripura, and a scarcely populated wilderness called the NEFA.* Spreading over an area of 20,3,443 square kilometers, Assam, with its capital at Shillong, was the premier state in the north-east under the British. Manipur and Tripura were never been a part of Assam, but the NEFA for all practical purposes was considered to be a part of it as the Governor of Assam being the agent of the Governor-General of India exercised political control over the governance of that area. The province was deprived of its premier position after its merger with East Bengal in 1905 when a new province, Eastern Bengal and Assam, came into existence. East Bengal's age-old capital Dacca, naturally, became the new capital of Assam instead of Shillong. It remained so until 1911 when Assam was separated from East Bengal and restored to its pre-merger position with capital at Shillong.

The said merger period (1905-1911), however, was quite meaningful from the migration point of view. The people from the East Bengal districts (mostly Muslim population of the lower strata) then migrated

* NEFA is the abbreviated name of the North East Frontier Agency which the British brought under their control in 1833 the year on which the whole of Assam came under them. (See, *India, 1990*; a reference annual, compiled and edited by Research and Reference Division, Government of India, p. 748).

quite confidently to the north-eastern part of India as none questioned their legal status. It was one-sided demographic flow i.e. from East Bengal districts to select Assam districts; a natural migration from densely populated area to scarcely populated pockets. Legally, it was then inter-district migrations. The Muslim migrants of East Bengal districts found certain places in the Assam Valley as good as their native land which furthermore offered them better employment opportunities for easy survival. This was the fundamental reason behind the early migration from Bengal districts to Assam districts although, as will be seen later, it was politicised in the long run although, as will be seen later, it was politicised in the long run with the escalation of the Muslim League politics since 1930s. The Assam administration did not then officially oppose the settlement of Bengali Muslims in the fallow lands of the valley as they grew there "more food" for the natives of Assam.¹ Even after the separation of Assam from East Bengal in 1911 the province continued to receive the flow of migration from East Bengal year after year. The settlement of Bengali Muslim immigrants in Assam helped to swell the number of Muslim population in the province at each successive decade. In 1911, for instance, the number of Muslim population in Assam was 3,65,540, it rose to 5,94,981 persons in 1921, and in 1931 it shot up further to 9,53,299 heads. In terms of percentage it was 9 per cent in 1921, 19 per cent in 1931 and 23 per cent in 1941.²

The indigenous inhabitants in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam sharply reacted to the settlement of Bengali-speaking East Bengal migrants in their land. This brought about linguistic and cultural conflicts between the natives of Assam and the East Bengal migrants. The Muslim immigrants' reaction to this sensitive issue was quite businesslike.³ Constituting the largest religious group among the immigrant population in Assam they volunteered ungrudgingly to pick up the Assamese language and culture as their own to appease the aggrieved native gentry; but only lukewarm was the response to this cause among the Hindu immigrants who were fewer in number than the Muslims in the Brahmaputra valley.⁴ A trail of unredressed ill-feeling continued to persist in the native mind only to gain increased momentum in the long run. The native sentiment was badly wounded on the economic issues as well. The immigrants' occupation of wastelands, grazing and forest reserves, mass squatting and purchase of land by offering tempting price to the native owners were some of the causes of anguish in the

Assamese mind as they adversely affected their economic life.

Quite reverse was the picture in the other valley of Assam then known by the name, Surma Valley which comprised two districts, Cachar and Sylhet, marked by their conspicuous absence of the Assamese population. But then dominance of the Bengali-speaking population presented in that valley an ethnic affinity which induced the middle class Hindu Bengalis of East Bengal rather to migrate and settle there than in the Brahmaputra valley or Assam proper. Consequently percentage of the immigrant population in both the districts of the Surma Valley increased quite abnormally. Yet it did not create any demographic problem as it did in the Brahmaputra valley, but increase in Muslim population in Sylhet from 52.6 per cent in 1911 to 58.9 per cent in 1931 transformed it into a Muslim majority district in Assam.⁶

The migration from East Bengal districts to the state of Assam appeared to the Assamese gentry as a threat to their social and cultural life. Asomiya Sangrakshani Sabha, as the mouthpiece of the native opinion, spearheaded a constitutional movement in the 1930s to preserve the Assamese language and culture by demanding "restricted immigration" to Assam under the government control.⁷ The issue, however, entered into an exciting political phase when All India Muslim League opposed the Assamese viewpoint and pleaded for "an unrestricted immigration."⁸ So far migrations from Bengal districts to Assam proper generated linguistic and cultural problems alone but the Muslim League politicised it by opposing the stand of the Sabha from a political platform. When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's view was sought for in this regard by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee he expressed his preference for a "restricted immigration" in consideration of Assam's peculiar ethnic background.⁹ The Government of Assam was also not in a mood to allow "unrestricted immigration" to continue as it was apprehensive of the fact that this might "drive away the indigenous inhabitants completely off the map."¹⁰ Yet the government failed to resolve the controversy owing to sharp division of political opinions on the immigration issue.

After a careful analysis of the early phase of migration during the pre-partition days one would certainly form an impression that the indigenous people in the Brahmaputra valley (or Assam proper) opposed the settlement of migrants on the ground of ethnic antipathy but in the Surma Valley it remained unopposed owing to ethnic affinity. If a



“restricted immigration” was a demand of the indigenous people in the Assam valley one can find behind it a plausible reason, but what reason one can assign for the Muslim League’s persistent demand for an “unrestricted immigration” to the Assam valley districts other than political reasons. The situation changed radically since 1930s when the Muslim League politics based on the “two-nation theory” of M.A. Jinnah caught the imagination of the most of the Muslims in East Bengal.^{11*} Immigration into Assam no longer remained simply an inter-district or inter-provincial migration involving ethnic questions alone but assumed serious political dimensions. By the time the great partition of the Indian sub-continent (1947) was in sight the Assam district of Sylhet had already transformed into a Muslim majority district consequent on massive immigration. And this enabled the Muslim League to demand fearfully a plebiscite there to determine its political future. The verdict was a foregone conclusion. The plebiscite held in 1946 decided the fate of Sylhet district in favour of the Muslim League.¹² This was one of the fundamental reasons why immigration from East Bengal districts into Assam was viewed thereafter with suspicion by the non-Muslims.

The historic partition of India (1947) affected directly the political geography of two Indian provinces, Bengal and the Punjab. Each of the two provinces was physically divided to give effect to Jinnah’s controversial “two-nation theory” which of course proved to be a fallacious concept within two decades of the partition.¹³ As per terms of the agreement undisputed Muslim majority areas were to come under Pakistan and the political future of the controversial territory was to be decided by the verdict of plebiscite. As all East Bengal districts had clear Muslim majority they formed the base for Pakistan’s eastern wing.

* M.A. Jinnah’s controversial two-nation theory made him an equally controversial nationalist leader of India. In fact so long he remained in the Congress camp he was regarded by Gokhale and others as the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity. Subhash Chandra Bose agreed to accept him as the future Prime Minister of India had he agreed to launch jointly Hindu-Muslim movement against the British government in India. Though he opposed Gandhiji’s non-cooperation movement, neither Gandhiji nor Netaji ever ignored him so long he was in the Congress party. But his two-nation theory had upset the Congress plan of joint anti-British movement in India. His two-nation concept blocked up any political dialogue between the Congress and the Muslim League. But this endeared Jinnah to the radical section of the Muslim community in East Bengal and other parts of India.

The Assam district of Sylhet was a disputed part, its major portion came under East Pakistan following the verdict of a referendum.^{14**} The final question came how to divide the sub-continent on the map. It was a difficult task to divide India creating two wings of Pakistan on the basis of religion and territorial contiguity disregarding other factors. Yet such a burdensome duty was entrusted to Lord Carlyll Radcliffe to actualise it as hurriedly as possible to give effect to the political agreement to the partition of the Indian sub-continent. Radcliffe did what best he could do in 1947 in drawing an international line (Radcliffe Line) between India and Pakistan including its eastern wing. In certain places he was compelled to draw his line across private kitchens, dwelling houses, cow-sheds, paddy-fields and village markets in the north-eastern part of India.^{15**} The length of the Radcliff Line between Assam and East Pakistan was 262 km of which 92 kilometres was riverine. It was both a porous and an imposed boundary which one could easily trespass upon whenever one liked it from either side of the frontier. Naturally entry across the line became an easy matter, yet legally turned into infiltration into a foreign land.

The new ruling elites in Pakistan devoted little attention to fight down evils of the British colonial rule in East Pakistan. They rather endeavoured to erect a new colonial edifice in their eastern wing following the principle of divide and rule. To achieve this end they gave currency to an impression that religion made a Punjabi or Uttar Pradesh Muslim much closer to a Bengali Muslim in East Pakistan than his next door Hindu neighbour.¹⁶ This gave the Muslims in East Pakistan a new religious identity which affected the age-old Hindu-Muslim social ties based on linguistic and cultural affinities. In fact the society which was already tensed communally after the pre-partition October riots of

* The boundary commission states: “The Award of the Bengal Boundary Commission regarding Sylhet as resulted in the whole of that district being transferred from the province of Assam to the new province of East Bengal, except four thanas of Patherkandi, Ratabari, Karimganj and Badarpur. No other part of the province of Assam has been transferred to East Bengal.”

** The Radcliffe Award was officially published on the 17th August, 1947 and reproduced in the mainstream journals the following day. It demarcated 4000 km. long Indo-Pakistan border of which Assam-E. Pakistan border is 262 km. In the euphoric state of mind despite past gory incidents none could visualise then the uselessness of that international frontier between the north-eastern states of India and erstwhile East Pakistan.

1946 received further insinuation from the Pakistani ruling elites for their desperate attempts to drive out the Hindus from the country. This caused communal riots in 1950 which forced the Hindus to desert the country in thousands.¹⁷ The Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, of course, tried to sort out the communally sensitive issues and signed a pact in 1950 to normalise the situations.¹⁸ Yet distrust, hatred and deep feeling of bitterness remained as intense as before in the majority mind. The East Pakistani administration could not be so geared up as to protect the religious minorities from the organised attacks of the majority on any flimsy pretext. The result was the continuance of Hindu migration from the country. The corresponding census reports indicate that the number of Hindu population found to be 28 per cent in 1941 came down to 22 per cent in 1951.¹⁹ Furthermore four discriminatory property laws, enacted between 1947 and 1952, not only debarred a Hindu to sell-out his property without official permission but also empowered the government to confiscate any left-over Hindu property.²⁰ The obvious purpose of the Urdu-speaking military ruling elites was to:

- (a) encourage communal riots in East-Pakistan and thereby to provoke communally-toned Hindu retaliations in Urdu-speaking Muslim belts in the Indian provinces like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and compel the panic-stricken Indian Muslims to enter into East Pakistan and settle there as immigrants.
- (b) reduce the number of Bengali-speaking Hindus and increase the number of Urdu-speaking Indian Muslim immigrants in East Pakistan.
- (c) Confiscate the left-over Hindu property and distribute them among the few favoured non-Hindus to promote the interests of the Urdu-speaking Pakistani ruling elites.

The communal riots broke out in East Pakistan in 1950, 1962 and 1964.²¹ The intensity of the last one was so deep that it spontaneously induced a large number of the democratic-minded educated Muslims of East Pakistan headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to bring out protest demonstrations in the streets of Dhaka defying the Martial Law of General Ayub Khan (1958-69).²² Furthermore, between 1952 and 1969 as many as eleven discriminatory acts were passed that deprived the Hindus from their ancestral property.²³ The Indo-Pak War of 1965 presented before the ruling elites a good opportunity to make more

stringent legislations to treat left-over Hindu property as enemy property legally.²⁴ This made the plight of the Hindus in East Pakistan quite miserable under the West Pakistani rulers including military dictators.

On the other hand the plight of the middle class Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan was in no way better than the Bengali Hindus during the West Pakistani regime. The Muslim inhabitants in East Pakistan found it quite difficult to confront the perpetual economic exploitation of their Urdu-speaking West Pakistani masters. This led to emerge there a precarious living condition. Meanwhile an impression gained currency in the country that the West Pakistani economic exploitation of East Pakistan was more intense in form than what it had been under the British.²⁵ Sixty-one million Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis, for instance, enjoyed the lion's share of the country's wealth earned by seventy-one million Bengalis of East Pakistan through foreign exchange earnings.²⁶ West Pakistanis alone received major financial grants for developments in industry and public works.²⁷ Besides all foreign assistance, imports and defence facilities remained confined to West Pakistan. The cost of living in East Pakistan was always too high and the average income of the people continued to be too low for years together.²⁸ It was the economic hardship and limited means of earning that forced a part of the poorer section of the East Pakistan people, both Hindu and Muslim, to migrate from the country to the Indian provinces in search of easy means of livelihood. This was one of the primary reasons behind their becoming immigrants in the Indian territories.

It is however difficult to assess the number of East Pakistani people migrated to the Indian territories after the great partition of the Indian sub-continent and before the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The migrations immediately before and after the great partition of India (1947) were so gigantic and continuous, communal antagonism was so intense among the people and the law and order so paralysed in certain parts of the country that it was almost impossible for any authority to keep systematic records of the population movements of that period. Hence we have no alternative but to form rough estimates of the number of people migrated from East Pakistan to the Indian territories on the basis of quasi-official and non-official accounts. One source estimated the number of migrants from East Pakistan soon after the partition at 3.3 million.²⁹ Another source fixed it at 3.5 million by 1951.³⁰ A

Bangladesh research work calculates exclusively the Hindu migrations from East Pakistan to the Indian territories at the rate of 703 persons per day during 1964 to 1970.³¹ It is stated in another research work that from the October riot of 1946 to 1970 just before the birth of Bangladesh the number of East Pakistanis migrated to the Indian territories was 53,83,324 or about 5.3 million.³² From the above one can visualise the magnitude of migrations from East Pakistan to India. It is in this background illegal migrations and their impacts in Assam from the birth of Bangladesh to the termination of the twentieth century will be outlined in the forthcoming chapters.

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