

# Population Dynamics in North East India

*Editors*

**Asok Kumar Ray  
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Population question in the northeast region assumed critical dimension from the 1950s onward. This happened mainly because of the externally induced demographic growth in this region. Many movements took place in the mean time in the region to address the issue. Yet over the last four decades, this question remained unresolved. From social policy angle, the states of this region exhibited failed state syndrome. This led to both quantitative and qualitative crises of growing population in the region.

In this backdrop, this book gives very useful insight to the population dynamics in the region from inter-disciplinary angles. The articles published in this book are well researched and touch upon the historical aspects, larger issues of population growth in the region, state level and micro level case studies and upon the larger policy issues pertaining to population growth and human development in this region.

This book immensely contributes to the existing literature on the subject and contains strong academic value. This book is also useful for the policy makers and policy researchers in and on this region.

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## PREFACE

The northeast India has a unique population composition. The population of the region is composed of the autochthons and the immigrants both from other parts of the country and from across the borders. The increased population figures in the states of the region are externally induced. Although the migrant communities historically contributed to civilization building in this region, the demographic dividend is now exposed to serious criticalities. This we have experienced in all the states of the region. The politics and economics in this region are largely influenced by the externally induced population growth. This phenomenon led to many movements in the region in the past and at present. Although reproductive behaviour of the people in this region is non-restrictive, it itself does not make an issue of discord.

The articles of the book are well researched and articulate. The book has identified the major issues of population dynamics through the macro-level studies and micro level case studies in order to identify the policy contours. The articles therefore range from general overview of the regional scenario, state specific and community specific case studies to policy issues pertaining to RCH and population policy, Mid Day Meal, literacy, human development etc. The articles are of inter-disciplinary nature and touch upon the policy contours in many ways.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature and caters the need of the academic community, researchers and the policy makers engaged in and on this region.

On behalf of the North East India Council for Social Science Research, I have the pleasure to extend heartfelt thanks to all the paper contributors from different parts of the region and outside the region. I thank Dr. Asok Kumar Ray and Dr. Sutapa Sengupta

who have taken pains to edit this book. My special thanks go to Dr. Asok Kumar Ray for writing the Editorial Notes.

I also thank Om Publications, New Delhi for timely publishing this book.

March 5, 2008

**Prof. Basudev Datta Ray**  
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Shillong, Meghalaya

## **EDITORIAL NOTES**

### **The Background**

The northeastern India housed a very large number of people from not only the neighbouring states but also from the neighbouring countries at different historical transects. The region withstood different waves of migration from the archaic past through the era of colonial rule, partition and post-partition regimes to the present day both from the neighbourhood as well as from across the borders. Such migration at certain point in the archaic past possibly contributed to civilization building and building collective identity in this region largely through incorporation mode. This also contributed to building historic community in this region. On the other hand the major criticality over migration emerged in the region in the colonial era when large-scale labour migration took place for the British industrial set ups in the region. This, though created a major divide between the autochthons and the migrants, did not result in any major social outburst in the colonial period. The criticality so emerged really surfaced in the partition and the post-partition era till the population question in the northeast India assumed serious dimensions in recent times. This attracted attention of the planners, decision-makers, development agencies and the academic communities. The northeast India, with 4% of the total country-population, has shown unique features of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic and multi-religious conglomerations. While this multiplicity added to the beauty of the region, the growth rate of population in this region caused serious concerns. Though percentage-wise less significant, growth-rate-wise the region has surpassed the national population.

The population dynamics in the northeastern region can be viewed from two opposite conceptual approaches. One is the Malthusian approach, the other is the 'democratic dividend'

approach. In case of the northeast, the discourses on these approaches in understanding population dynamics became complicated. The thinkers became divided in their opinions. While historically 'demographic dividend' approach worked well in the early economic, social and cultural formations of northeastern region and contributed to the overall development, in the contemporary context of the region this approach has lost much of its historical relevance. The region in the present context has also lost its pull factor that it once had. Population therefore, instead of being asset, has become liability for the region. Lack of human resource development initiatives in this region also hindered the gains from demographic dividend.

Some quarters on the other hand still find current relevance of Malthusian approach in the context of the northeastern region as negative correlation between population growth and food production and food availability has exposed the worst trends. In the Malthusian vein argument has therefore been put forward that increasing population in the region put pressure on the environmental and natural resource endowments causing serious ecological imbalance, food insecurity and increased sufferings of the people.

We can find two sets of population in this region and their fertility behaviour in two different contexts. The first one is the local context of subsistence economy, local customs and local set of population who are mostly the tribal people. As such the demographic explosion caused by fertility behaviour within the tribal communities in the northeastern India is by and large a non-issue. However the customary and religious practices have a great role in the tribal societies and these no doubt largely govern the fertility behaviour of the people. These convictions not to a small extent de-rationalize small family norms within the tribal societies. In the Christianity dominated states of the northeast, the tribal people do not believe in artificial population control. In Christian ethics population control is prohibited. The firm stands of the Church and the Missionaries in the northeastern region against the use of modern contraceptive methods and abortion have highly impacted on the reproductive behaviour of the people belonging to that faith. The customary practices in the tribal societies also do not encourage

quantitative elimination. Such practices and convictions, when bracketed within socio-cultural milieu, influence demography in the developing countries like India. In fact in the more traditional Third World countries culture to a great extent determines the human behaviour and even with modernization such cultural determinism does not lose importance. And this factor is largely responsible for denial of small family norms. The assumption therefore is that fertility and mortality are culturally constructed and act as the determining factors in demographic structure. Among the Khasi of Meghalaya for example, the traditional value of family lies in the number of children born and reared up. In the marriage ceremony special prayers are made to bless the couple for giving birth to many children and also to bless them to live longer to see the grandchildren. Cultural determinism is also tested in a micro study of fertility behaviour of the Karbi women. It is seen that fertility rate and pregnancy related wastage are higher in joint families. Traditional occupation of the husbands also impacts fertility behaviour. Their sex ratio is 114:100; menarchial age varies from 11-15 years; menopause age varies from 41-50 years; mean interval from marriage to first conception is 2 years and death case and still-birth given by younger mothers are lesser.

The second one is the regional and transnational contexts created out of the Partition of the country resulting in a set of population largely the migrants that came to the northeastern region from beyond the region and beyond the borders. The larger discourse on population dynamics in this region centers round this context. There seems to be two ways by which the migrant communities inflated the demographic figures and impacted the demographic structures in this region. One is influx from the other side of the border in which case *influx itself* caused quantitative increase. (We know that the entire region has international boundaries with Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China). The other is the politically calculated fertility behaviour of the migrant people as a strategy for survival and community recognition in the more liberal and welcoming political system of India. If we see fertility and reproductive behaviour of the Muslim community for example, we can reckon with this fact. As a result, the growth rate of the Muslim community became higher than the so-called Hindu rate from 1901.

Again the growth rate of Muslim community during 1951 to 1991 was higher than that of the Hindu rate during the same decades. In the larger context of the northeastern region population growth is therefore influenced more by immigration than by reproductive and fertility behaviour of the local people. The phenomenon of immigration therefore contests the concept of pure cultural determinism of fertility behaviour. In fact immigration alone posed a number of challenges in the region particularly after the partition of the country. Such strategic fertility-behaviour of the migrant communities had serious political, social and economic ramifications. In fact both the migrants and the autochthons now apprehend their descent to minority status and threatened *status quo* within the Indian state. The migrants from the trans-border come as minorities and after arrival they go on increasing the number for political and economic survival. The autochthons are in so-called majority but they become vulnerable to minority status when migrant population challenge them numerically and claim separate political recognition in the host country. Thus reproductive behaviour plays important role both in majority and in minority politics and at the same time strengthens the 'induced process'. In other words in northeast India the 'induced process' set by influx and immigration plays a bigger role than the 'natural process' in population dynamics.

### The Regional Scenario

In this larger context a historical retrospection of migration in Assam in particular and in the region in general can be made. Human migration started from the early phases of pre-history down to the phase of civilization in different parts of the world. In the civilization phase mankind evolved the concept of political boundary and concepts of 'foreigner' and 'outsider' eventually evolved. This often led to clashes between the so-called natives and non-natives over territorial boundaries and over the spiritual culture of the so-called indigenes. Northeast India is such a land where waves of migration of people took place from multiple directions at different points of history. While the region provided abode to a large number of autochthons, migration of population from Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal,

Burma, Mongolia and China happened at different parts of the region. The more powerful migrant community could, in this process, establish numerical supremacy over the indigenous communities and subsequently establish political supremacy over the autochthons. This they did do by forceful occupation of the lands and subject formation of the local people. In case of Assam, such political supremacy was established by the 'Ahom' tribe, migrated from Thailand. The Ahom tribe first brought the concept of kingdom in Assam. But the migration of Aryans in this region was phenomenal as this alone could drastically influence the erstwhile political and social formations and the course of history of the state. Muslim migration took place at a later part of history with the invasion of the Mughals. This build the process of religious syncretism and ethnic assimilation and opened up the region to the traders and revenue workers from Bengal. Besides the Sikh and the Marwari communities also came to the state. The Treaty of Yandaboo and subsequent colonization of Assam was another landmark. Colonial rule also brought many outsiders from Bengal to work for the British administration. This was followed by inflow of tea garden labours to Assam and to other parts of northeast India from different states of India and from Nepal. Muslim migration in Assam was inflated during the British rule and there was strong advocacy in certain quarters for bringing more Muslim farmers in the pretext of growing more food.

The Deoris who followed *Sakta cult*, were the temple worshippers in Sadiya in Assam. Their original abode is believed to be in the northeast Asia i.e., in the Chinese and Mongolian territories. Though considered as tribal priests, some people view them as the first Aryans who migrated to Assam and used their language in worship of god in the Kamta-Kamrup region of Assam. They left their imprints in different temples and religious shrines of Assam. The Deoris have four major groups each with distinct socio-cultural traditions. They are now distributed over a number of districts in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Their highest concentration is found in Sadiya district of Assam. They had to disperse from their original resort in the 17<sup>th</sup> century following inter-tribal feuds, disease, epidemics, natural calamities and capture of their lands by more powerful tribes. Redistribution of Deori



population and their assimilation in the Assamese society brought changes in their religious and cultural practices, occupations, dress, language and housing types. Despite all these they could survive with dignity and self-esteem in Assam. Of late there is a growing consciousness in the educated Deori community against the luxuriant religious practices and festivals. But at the same time they have become conscious for revival of their past history.

Among all the historic migrations, Bengali migration in this region became quantitatively significant. After the Partition of the country, it became more serious so far as northeast India is concerned. Partition led to Hindu, Muslim and Chakma migration to the northeast. Things became worse after the Bangladesh War. The missing voters in Bangladesh indicated decline of the Hindu and Buddhist Populations in that country, who eventually became refugees in India. (The Indira-Mujib Pact was welcoming of the refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan). Besides, illegal migration continued unabated. Viewed chronologically, in-migration took place at different historic transects in Assam: Pre-colonial migration; Migration of Tea labour; Creation of separate provinces of East Bengal and Assam by Lord Curzon in 1905; Grow More food Campaign of Sadulla Ministry in Assam; Partition of Bengal and creation of East Pakistan; Bangladesh War and the aftermath. Several factors were responsible for such large-scale migration. Some of these are: religious persecution in Bangladesh, Islamic interest in encouraging uncontrolled population, vote bank politics in India and soaring unemployment in Bangladesh. Porous border with Bangladesh, recurrent flood and cyclone in Bangladesh, better economic opportunities in India, presence of strong pro-Bangladeshi lobby in India and social patronage of the relatives living this side of the border also perpetuated cross-border migration. Although the Supreme Court of India struck down the IMDT Act, infiltration from the other side of the border could not be effectively checked. The situation became worse with increasing border smuggling and politics of terrorism; law and order problems and with emergence of minority syndrome in the Assamese psyche.

But the reactions of the two states namely West Bengal and Assam that were most affected by Partition, were different. If we see a comparative parameter on cross border migration in eastern

and northeastern India, we get more critical focus on unmaking the official narrative of the Indian nation. Cross-border migration, consequent upon partition, created cleavage of ethnic inclusion and exclusion vis-a-vis the Indian nationhood among the Bengalis of West Bengal and the Assamese of Assam. The nature of such cleavage between the migrants and the autochthons was however different in the two states. Incidentally the migrants in West Bengal were by and large Bengali-speaking Hindus and were culturally similar. West Bengal by virtue of that showed more accommodative gesture towards them. Assam on the contrary exposed the polarity between the Assamese and Bengalis that at times coincided with the polarity between the Hindus and the Muslims. This gave rise to the politics of disenfranchisement of foreigners in Assam in the mid-1980s. This at the same time divided the electorate on ethnic lines. In fact the official narrative of the Indian nation became situated in opposition to history and the nationalist leaders tended to separate ethnic identity from citizen identity and made the individuals identical and substitutable to each other notwithstanding their ethnic or other identities. Such citizens became politically anonymous. This anonymity gave dividend to the refugee Bengalis particularly the women refugees that gave them great relief from the 'stigma' in working in public place and provided them relative advantage in livelihood earning. More than that the citizenized world of West Bengal provided them musk to hide their faces. Therefore refugee discourse in eastern India centered round 'rights and citizenship'. In Assam's case also there was clear and definite commitment of the state to the official narrative of the Indian nation. Nevertheless there were differences between the two states on the issue of refugees in terms of inclusionary and exclusionary attitudes. In West Bengal the official narrative of nationhood was made and unmade by the inclusive mode consequent upon the arrival of refugees from East Pakistan and some opposition leaders even expressed discontent against the central government's policy of deporting the excess population to other parts of the country and eventually dismembering the Bengali community. For the immigrants in Assam on the other hand, the issue was not only of recognition of their identity as ethnic Assamese and as Indian citizen but also of differentiation between citizens and foreigners. In Assam

immigration issue unmade the official narrative of nationhood through exclusionary mode. The ethnic Assamese apprehended, and the Assam movement registered, of not only being outnumbered by immigrants but also of losing their own language and culture in their own land. Therefore the Assam movement rather insisted on shutting off the 'open door' policy of the Indian state. In short, the phenomenon of cross-border migration exhibited two distinct scenarios. In West Bengal the latent hostility between the natives and the immigrants notwithstanding, both constituted inclusive category that eventually merged into the concept of citizenship. Such citizenship, though featured by anonymity particularly in the context of partition, largely constituted the grand narrative of the Indian nationhood. In Assam on the other hand the native-immigrant hostility created exclusion syndrome, de-essentialized citizenship and eventually stymied the grand narratives.

Such stereotyping of construction-deconstruction in West Bengal and Assam is however contested with empirical evidence of the Nepali migration in Assam in the early 1920s and their essential assimilation with the locals Assamese. Their contribution to growth dynamics and to the economy of Assam validated the concept of demographic dividend and the transformational role of the migrant communities. In short, migration, democratic dividend and transformational society became mutually constitutive categories.

The ethno-demographic studies that featured the Indian census till 1931 took a positive turn towards attending specialized social-cultural parameters so as to evince various governmental development programmes since the 1961 Census. In this process the disabled population became one of the target groups of 2001 census. According to the 2001 census the percentage of disabled populations of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh exceeded to that of the all India average. In case of six other states it was below the all India average. The N.E. states also showed differential percentages of disabled population when compared with the all India average. This scenario warrants a practical need assessment of this group in this region for extending socio-economic, cultural and medical opportunities. The NGO networks of the region need to work for them and raise awareness among the people so that the disabled

populations do not feel neglected but can find meaning of their existence as a productive force.

As we discussed before, in Assam the growth of population was more 'externally induced' than 'natural growth' of population. Migration of plantation labour, Bengali peasants, Nepali Graziers and the displaced people from erstwhile East Pakistan and migration of traders and service holders from different parts of India featured the dynamics of population in Assam. Much of it was contributed by the 'pull factor' in Assam. All these changed the demographic structure of the Brahmaputra valley. Each group of immigrants added to the demographic complexities and impacted social geography in Brahmaputra valley in particular and in Assam in general. The constitution and re-constitution of the Indian land and territorial shuffling at different phases of colonial rule impacted Assam in a large way and the homogeneity, if any developed in the course of history, was broken in this process. This was the one reason for three-fold increase of population in the Brahmaputra valley during 1872 and 1946. Of all the immigrants, those from the then Eastern Bengal were most significant. Heterogeneity thus created, downsized the indigenes and became the root of all conflicts in Assam.

From linguistic point of view Assam shows some interesting features: (i) in Assam there are two parallel scheduled languages-Assamese and Bengali; (ii) there are about 68 non-scheduled languages spoken by different tribes of the state; (iii) over the period from 1971-1991 the Bengali speaking people outnumbered the Assamese speaking people; (iv) there are some floating linguistic groups in Assam; (v) Bangla language apart, the non-scheduled languages of the tribes also have superseded the Assamese language. Besides the Tea tribes of Assam are now struggling for inclusion of their languages in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution and for re-establishing their languages to fulfill the criteria of being included in the Scheduled Tribes List of Assam.

The natural growth of the migrant Bengali refugees and adoption of Bengali language as mother tongue by some of the tribal groups are also responsible for the growth of Bengali speaking population in the state. On the other hand the Bengali speaking settlers in the

Char areas of Assam ( a process started from the historic migration of the Bengali population from Mymensingh district of Eastern Bengal and from Sylhet district of Assam to settle in the fertile Char areas for cultivation) show a reverse trend. The Char villages were subject to different administrative arrangements from time to time. Though the Char villagers in different districts of the Assam valley are largely poor and grossly lack social opportunities, their assimilation into the Assamese language and culture and their role in Assam Sahitya Sabha and in the literary activities bear testimony of their building a larger Assamese nationality. This assimilation to some extent eased the tension created by silent "invasion of Assam by the advancing hoards of Mymensinghia army"- the tension that was expressed by Mr. C.S. Mullan, the Superintendent of Census-1931.

Multi-culturism and multi-lingualism in the Brahmaputra valley have both made and un-made Assam. The need for a pan-Assamese nationality was augmented through the introduction of Assamese language as the official language of the state. This language was exclusive in character and in course of time some other emerging linguistic movements in the state challenged the official language and contested its chauvinistic nature. Such scenario in Assam threatened her composite nationality identity and as such threatened the Brahmaputra civilization that grew over time with the larger contributions of the different ethnic and linguistic groups from and beyond different parts of the country. Such scenario also de-essentialized the demographic dividend thesis.

On the other hand migration of the Nepali community to Assam showed a reverse trend. Nepali migration to the land of Assam is traceable from the historic past. In the view of the Vedic Aryans the Nepali community was better known as the Kiratas. In the pre-colonial period unfriendly social, political and economic environments and oppressive political system in Nepal triggered off Nepali migration. These led to push out of many Nepalese from Nepal and to settle in India. Their migration in the pre-colonial period did not cause demographic imbalance in Assam. However their migration to India became significant during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they were recruited chiefly in the British army. They were recruited also in many non-military professions

as cheap labour. Besides, their engagement in grazing, dairy farming and agricultural activities yielded revenue to the British and at the same time ensured livelihood to them. Revenue interest of the British led to invite more Nepali people to settle down in Assam. Their number started to increase so much so that after Bengal, Assam became the second largest abode for the Nepali people. The British also patronized the Nepali ex-soldiers to settle in different districts of Assam both as a reward for their loyal service to the army and for strategic reasons. The historic cultural ties between Assam and Nepal, royal unions and geographical proximity of Assam and Nepal contributed to the Nepalese being assimilated in the Greater Assamese culture. This is one unique feature of the Nepali community in Assam. Apart from their economic contribution, their cultural relations and even participation in the Indian freedom movement brought the community closer to the Assamese and to foster brotherhood.

One significant dynamics of migration is rural-to-urban migration of the people. In northeast India Guwahati is the largest city. Four types of migrations take place here. These are intra-state, inter-state, regional and national/international. The intra-state migrants are largely the floating people comprising the students, business community including petty businessmen, workers working in the tailoring shops, beauty parlours, computer centers (this includes girls), vendors, sales agents, daily commuters, low order job holders and the unorganized sector workers. Their age group is 15-45 years consisting largely the male sections with poor socio-economic backgrounds. Their income level is low. Among the floating population Assamese speaking people is followed by Bengali speaking and other language speaking people. High concentration of population in Guwahati city happened not due to natural growth but due to in-migration. Though the floating population contributes to the economic activities of the city, their increased presence high-pressed the city and eventually the city areas became cramped and crowded. This also led to different social and environmental problems and anti-social activities. Traffic congestion, increased land value and house rents in the city and overcrowding serious causes of concerns.

Silchar Township has experienced growth of urban people and urban slums over the decades. Though the urban category changed from time to time, concentration of people in relatively prosperous areas caused growth of city population and slums. In Assam as a whole concentration of people in the city areas has become more conspicuous in view of the fact that the region as a whole is lesser urbanized and consequently the load of population is beyond the carrying capacity of the towns and cities. As a matter of fact many townships have come up in the region also as administrative units. These towns do not virtually have the town-like infrastructure and other urban features. Many such urban areas are infested with slums. Though slum growth of this region is much less than that in other mega-cities, cities and township in India, the magnificence of slum problem is not much less specially in the context of lesser urbanization in the region.

Silchar Township is however the district headquarters in the state of Assam. The growth rate of population in this township has shown increasing trends over the ten decades. Political disturbances in the neighbouring states are a major reason for influx of people in this township. This has led to the growth of cramped and crowded houses with very little social amenities like drinking water and sanitation, electricity and road communication, drainage and waste disposal system. Besides vehicular and air pollutions and road jams in this city have increased considerably particularly after the liberalization period. The number of slum pockets in this town also increased over time and the number of slum population increased at a higher rate. The density of population in the slums became quite high and the income and literacy levels of the slum dwellers remained quite low. Despite different schemes to improve slums in the township, no impact is so far seen.

In Manipur, like Assam, the population increase happened mainly due to influx of refugees and outsiders than due to the reproductive behaviour of the local communities. We can see three types of migration in the state: external migration (beyond the territorial border of the state); internal migration (from other regions of the state) and from the hill areas to the plain areas. Illegal migration from across the international boundary of the state became a major concern. There has been increasingly high rate of population

growth in the state. There was 18.82 lakhs increase in population during 1901 to 2001. From the year 1951 to 1991, there was decrease in percentage of growth rate of rural areas and increase in percentage of growth rate of urban areas. The sex ratio had declining from 1,036 in 1951 to 958 in 1991 but it slightly enhanced to 978 in 2001. The density of population increased from 26 per sq.km in 1951 to 97 per sq.km in 2001. The overall decennial growth of population has been higher in Manipur than the All India decennial growth from 1901 to 2001. Such increase in population disturbed demographic balance, created adverse land-man ratio, subsistence pressure and erosion of the commons. Hill-to-valley migration changed land-use pattern, threatened forest resources, agriculture and food security. The outsiders by virtue of their superior skill took control over the resources of land, trade and commerce and over the labour market available in the state. After the merger of Manipur with the Union of India, the 'Foreigners' Permit System' was abolished. The Foreigners' (Protected Areas) Order 1958 left scope for the Napali migrants to continue to pour in the state. The ill-protected and ill-defined international boundaries were to not less extent responsible for influx of illegal migrants.

The impact of inflated population in the state on the land-use pattern is significant. Though land utilization statistics for the entire state of Manipur are not substantively available, as per the land utilisation statistics of 200-2001, out of the total geographical area, the reporting area is only about 1,90,446 hectares. 26,900 hectares of land are not available for cultivation. In 2000-2001 the fallow land covered 200 hectares and other uncultivated land excluding the fallow land covered 8,055 hectares which accounted for about 4.23 percent of the total reporting area. The cultivable land area in the valley remained more or less the same whereas the number of labourers engaged in the agricultural sector increased considerably. The marginal production did not yet increase. This impelled the state to import most of the important food items including vegetable from outside.

In the context of Manipur's explosive growth of population, the per capita cultivable area has declined tremendously. With more and more population engaged in agricultural sector, the per capita share in production has also declined. Such adverse land-man ratio

has become a stumbling block to the success of any plan for agricultural development. This also has created the problem of rack renting disabling the actual tillers getting reasonable return for their own labour, thereby reducing land productivity. Besides, conversion of cultivable areas in the valley into non-agricultural areas created imbalance between the hills and the plains. Increasing livelihood crisis in the hills of Manipur made the hill-to-valley migration phenomenal. Studies have revealed that as per the 2001 census, density of population in the valley was 631 people per sq. mile as against 44 person per sq km in the hills. Availability of employment facility, better means of transport and communication, availability of all the basic needs etc. have attracted other people to the valley of Manipur. The geographical, social and economic backwardness of the hills added load on the plains. Paradoxically, underutilization of vast natural resources in the hills and lack of market infrastructure for trading local products in the interior hills added to the seriousness of the problem. The geographical structures in the hills of Manipur largely have either national or international borders. There are no entry restrictions either from outside or from the hills to the valley. This made the influx from outside easier. Lack of adequate border control and influx-monitoring in the hill check posts and in the international borders led to further influx.

Moreover lack of proper policy for sedentary cultivation in the hill, flood and soil erosion, degradation of forest areas and for frequent floods in the plain areas aggravated food crisis in the state.

This eventually adversely affected the quality of life of the people. Though the overwhelming majority of population live in rural areas, growth of urban centers and urban demography hard-pressed the existing urban infrastructure and services. Informalisation of the urban economy squeezed the scope of employment and sustained livelihood. Market economy and globalization process on the other hand led the educated disgruntled youth to wage cultural war.

Population growth rate in the Garo hills is higher than the state rate. Population here increased by thousands during the pre-Independence era while it increased by lakhs in the post Independence era. Density of population in the West Garo Hills district is higher than the state average in 1981, 1991 & 2001

censuses. On the contrary South Garo Hills recorded the lowest density of population, much lower than the all-India average in the 2001 census. The population growth rate of East & South Garo Hills districts during 1991-2001 was higher than the state's decadal growth rate of 30.65%. In the West Garo Hills district during 1991-2001 growth rate was lower than the state's decadal growth rate. The urban areas of the East Garo Hills district recorded the highest decadal increase. The sex ratio during 1981-2001 showed upward and downward trends in the East and West Garo Hills districts respectively.

Though the tribes constitute more than 85% of the total population, the Scheduled Caste population showed increasing trend from 1971 to 1991, but the trend decreased in 2001 census. The population of other communities who constituted about 19% in 1971, dwindled from 1981 to 2001. In Meghalaya, the Christian population dominates and one can find a negative growth of other religious groups whose growth rate in 1991 and 2001 dwindled. The percentage of other religious communities to total population is less than 5% but their decadal growth is very high (Muslims 69.50%, Buddhists 90.03% and Jains 79.78% in 2001 census). In terms of literacy Meghalaya ranked 27<sup>th</sup> in the All India ranking. Literacy status of women is very poor. Progress of industrialization is slow and the number non-working population is higher than the working population. All these factors let loose great socio-economic difficulties to the hill state of Meghalaya.

### **The Problems and Issues**

The last four consecutive Census Reports from 1971 to 2001 register higher rate of growth of population in the northeastern states- higher than the national average. The impact of immigration on the fragile economy and on the poverty scenario in the northeastern region is significant. As such this region except Assam lacks comprehensive studies on economic development and poverty. Reliable data on these are not available either. The methodology of data collection by NSS also complicated the poverty estimate in this region. Failure of income generating activities apart, the influx of refugees from Bangladesh created high pressure on the livelihood resources. As such the Bangladesh War in the early seventies became a bane for

Assam causing quantum jump in the population figure. A well-established network of relatives and friends in Assam helped fresh entrants from the other side of the border. This perpetuated the chain migration in Assam. This not only affected the economy but also posed great security threat to the Indian state. This in the Seventies and Eighties caused serious communal tensions in this region. The movement of Assam took serious note of the decadal percentage growth of population in Assam from 1901 to 1961-1971. All Assam Students Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad launched the Anti Foreigners Movement in 1979. This movement aimed at detection and deportation of all illegal foreigners from Assam and adoption of Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act-1983. This movement matured into a mass movement and following several rounds of talks with the movement leaders, the Assam Accord took place in 1985. But the Vital Clauses of the Accord relating to detection and deportation of the illegal migrants, citizenship and border sealing could not be implemented in the spirit of the accord. The government side remained largely inactive and allowed more than two decades to pass without taking any concrete action. This helped large number of illegal migrants to stay back in Assam. The government side did not sincerely comply with the Vital Clauses of the Assam Accord nor did it implement the Acts and laws in force to stop illegal migration. This opportunized the immigrants to become strong political force in the state. In this way Assam became the highly loaded state in the northeast to host the illegal refugees. This adversely affected economic, social and political environments. The indigenous people of Assam started to reduce to minority. The refugee population started to put pressure on the economic opportunities available in the region. The AGP regime that came after the Assam Accord could not successfully address the problem either; the Supreme Court declared the IMDT Act *ultra vires* and the Census figures proved thoroughly unreliable to address the problem. In the mean time migration in Assam and in other states of the region continued. Illegal migrant population got engaged in cross-border smuggling and pumping of fake currency across the border. A large section of them came to work in the unorganized sector like construction work.

What is significant is that in this region the rate of population

growth and poverty became higher than the national average. At the regional Level, there has been inter-state variation in poverty and within the region as a whole poverty scenario has dominated in Assam. Despite this state of things, the policy of the Indian state remained not only top-down but also insensitive towards this region. The presence of international borders with this region let loose apprehensions of influx and of the majority communities becoming minority. This factor affected development and caused conflicts in the northeastern states.

Some believe that migration specially in the globalization era could break the barriers of closed culture, language and race and could level the differences. This became more conspicuous among a section of the new generation youths. But the other side of the picture is the phenomenal marginalization of the regional youths and denial of economic and social opportunities to them. This made them insecure and restless. In recent times rural to urban migration in the states of Assam and Manipur became phenomenal. Fall in agricultural productivity and casualisation of labour constrained labour mobility. Growing unemployment and poverty concentration in the rural areas caused migration to urban areas for social and economic opportunities. This hard pressed the urban areas and the urban resource endowments. These exposed serious pathological symptoms including inter and intra-community conflicts.

The other fallouts of migration were obvious. High migration related population growth posed a limit to economic growth. Weak agriculture and industry in the northeastern region failed to accommodate the increased population. It on the contrary caused food insecurity and mass poverty so much so that the poverty level of the northeast region became higher than the national average. In the economic front immigration caused land alienation from the tribal to the non-tribal people. This in turn caused land-related conflicts in the region. In the social front, this led to higher infant mortality and fall in the health standard of the poor people. Besides this trend left serious ramification in terms of unemployment and low GDP. The region as a whole lagged behind in development. This made way for regional disparity that still persists.

If we examine the employment and unemployment patterns in the states of the northeastern region, we find that the percentage

of population engaged in agriculture is higher than that in the non-agricultural sector. In Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Meghalaya female participation in agriculture is higher compared to the All-India status. The females of Tripura and Assam on the other hand hold minimum share in agriculture. In these two states the women are working in sizeable percentage in tea plantation. In certain sectors the women are vulnerable to occupational segregation where they are concentrated in particular job categories. This gender-based segregation is highest in Assam and lowest in Manipur. Tripura and Nagaland also have high segregation value compared to the Indian agricultural workers. Their share of employment in non-agricultural sector is found highest in Sikkim and lowest in Arunachal Pradesh. Again in the non-agricultural sector employment is highest in Meghalaya and in oil refineries in Assam. In Manipur, Mizoram and Sikkim more women are coming in these sectors. In food processing, textile, wood work, apparel and furniture sectors unequal distribution of male and female workers is seen. In manufacturing sector female participation in the region is more than those in All-India. Though women in the region have enhanced their share in the service sector, occupational gender segregation is quite high compared to All-India.

But the more serious concern is that the women in the manufacturing sectors are paid lesser wage. Though in the service sector women of Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya are coming up more and more, job segregation, lesser wage and limited job and income opportunities of women in all sectors of the economy of this region are great causes of concern.

Conflicts among the different ethnic groups in the northeast have arisen due to the clash over economic, social and political interests. One can find maximum concentration of ethnic movements in the hill areas rather than in the plain areas. Inter ethnic conflicts in this region have broken down the archaic concept of group or collective identity and hill-valley symbiosis. It deconstructed the distinct identity of each tribe and sub-tribe. This led to reconstruction of the existing identities. At the same time certain groups like Kuki, Hmar, Naga and Khasi have caused significant changes in the ethnic composition of the people in N. C. Hills district and in Karbi Anglong district. In this process there

have been land alienation and conflicts over land resources among the competing ethnic groups. The role of the ethnic elites in maintaining ethnic differences as instrument of attaining personal gains and in engineering ethnic conflicts for the same is significant. For this purpose these elites keep away from the nation state perspective. Conflicting political interests of different ethnic groups also often cause conflicts. In the economic front different ethnic groups struggled for livelihood and got engaged in mutual conflicts that often led to insurgency and demand for secession. The defective administration and policies added fuel to the fire.

Another problem emanates from the adverse impact of population growth on ecological and environmental resources. Although it is well known that ecology and environment degradation cause serious problems including Green House Effect and Global Warming, the ecology-economy linkage in the northeast is rather complicated. Particularly in the context of northeast India this linkage is still controversial. The controversy arises out of the official view and the community view about the same. As such ecological and environmental resources as resources for community usufruct clash with the phenomenal private accumulation of the same. And this is more pronounced in the northeast region which still claims richness in terms of ecological and environmental resources.

Growth of slums and sub-standard housing in the city of Gauhati and in other towns of the state has posed serious environmental and ecological problems leading to pollution of every kind. In-migration is not only a rural to rural phenomenon. It has become urban to rural and from multi-ethnic disturbed areas to the ethnic homogenous townships. One example of this is the Silchar Township. This dynamics is changing not only the physical structure of the township but also the demographic pattern of the same.

In Manipur increasing migration has squeezed job, employment and trade opportunities for the local youth. These let loose many socio-economic and psychological problems in the state. Ethnic and cultural identities of the local communities have come under serious threats. This led to the anti-foreigners movement in 1980. The 16 Point Agreement between the government and the youth leaders in 1980 and the subsequent agreement between AMSU and the Government of Manipur in 1988 could not so far effectively detect

and evict the illegal migrants and foreigners. After six years of the agreement of 1988, the census record of 2001 alarmingly bulged. The number of foreigner or the migrant population superseded the number of the indigenous tribals of the state. This provoked the youths to militancy and alternative movements affecting development of the society. Quality of life in terms of per-capita income, education & literacy, health and safe drinking water particularly in the rural areas has not shown much improvement. Though life expectancy at birth, IMR and MMR have reduced, the public spending on health and education has reduced considerably and has caused fall in the quality of education and health services and infrastructures.

In the era of globalisation, population explosion and deteriorating quality of life of the people became major challenges. Economic policy has not been guided by the principle of redistributive justice and gender equity. Jobless growth in this region has pushed the youth community towards risky alternatives.

### **The Policy Issues**

Human development has become the buzzword in the post-structural adjustment era. Human development as understood by the UNDP stands between the Growth economics and social policy. Given inequality at the base of the society, human development intended to add some ethical component giving thereby a human face to development. The UNDP has standardized some indicators for human development and made efforts to gauge human development in many countries of the world by those indicators. The UNDP's Human Development Reports for more than a decade have faced both theoretical and practical difficulties. These have also exposed serious criticalities concerning economic reforms, growth and re-distribution.

One such criticality is the role of the state in social sector development. In the era of globalization the service delivery functions for social development have been largely snatched away from the state and given to private providers who can well influence the private sector induced service delivery. The second criticality is the corresponding downsize in public expenditure in social sector development. This has exposed crucial hiatus between economic

policy and social policy. While the state has shown weak linkages between economic growth and human development, the orthodox reform economy still considers economic growth as the pre-condition for human development. This has exposed pathological symptoms in education, health and food & nutrition services provided by the state. Thirdly, positive discrimination which provided a strong legitimacy to the state in the liberal frame, is surrendered to a maximum extent in the structural adjustment era. Increasing privatization of social service delivery posed serious threat to the legitimacy of the state.

Looking from a larger perspective of the developing countries, the Indian social policy even within the liberal frame could not be emancipatory and the rich-poor divide remained a constant fact rather than a fiction. The poor people too failed to strongly organize in order to bargain with the state on social sector development.

Coming back to the micro level, in the state of Assam, there has been regression in social sector development. There are presumably two reasons: one is the hypothesis of trickle down effect of social sector expenditure and its automaticity; the other is private sector expenditure for social development and eventual squeezing of public expenditure. As a result, the impact on social sector, if any, has been limited and piecemeal. The poor quality of infrastructure and larger dependency on the central government have further confounded the situation in the state. Lack of realistic planning, disregard to weighted preference in social sector spending and to restructuring social sector expenditure realistically could not bring about any tangible and positive impact. These resulted in gross negligence in health and education sectors and led to poor human development in all the states of the region.

From such critical angles we can examine the RCH and population policies that are adopted in India in the structural adjustment era. Both RCH and Population policy in India are linked with the larger global political economy. The World Bank took a lead role in formulating and drafting the RCH policy. Though family planning programme in India dates back to 1946, it was the Ford Foundation that supported such programme in a big way in the 1950s and by 1980s reproductive health became the key focus of the Foundation. In the meantime the need for population

stabilization was felt that was reflected in the National Health Policy-1983. This health policy eventually emphasized the need for a separate national population policy and in 1986 the focus was laid essentially on small family. In 1990 the Foundation supported the RCH programme. The five-point strategy of the World Bank Report namely: client centred approach; improved service quality and availability through community participation; involvement of private sector; adequate funding for current programme and expansion had greater implication in the political economy of RCH. The client-centered (acceptor) and target-free approach of RCH became central vision of the population policy- 2000 and later became integrated with MoHFW's Action Plan.

The structural adjustment programme governed the political economy of RCH policy. The major contours of RCH policy are: discouraging supply-side financing, tax-financed health care and subsidies by the public sector; promoting competitive private, corporate, private sectors and private practitioners and output/performance based funding through demand side financing; improving upon consumer constituency by creating health seeking behaviour; shifting from purely condom oriented approach towards wider set of concerns for future managers of social marketing and confining the role of MoHFW to strategy formulation. In fact in many aspects the RCH policy and the National Population Policy became the two sides of the same coin. Demand driven and target free goal is basically linked with market economy. The Demand-side financing has three instruments- Competitive Voucher Scheme, Compulsory Health Insurance Schemes and social franchising of RCH services that are virtually meant for privileging private sector and public private partnership that led to the reduced role of the public sector. But the paradox of the two policies is that while the RCH policy made a shift from population stabilization programme, the National Population Policy gave focus on stabilization. This exposed the contradiction with the 'sustainable development with more equal distribution' clause of the policy. The market driven top-down RCH and Population policies have boiled down women's health to reproductive health and trivialized a holistic social policy in the health sector and reconstituted gender ideology with the political economy of globalization.

Debates on social sector development and social sector spending became very strong after India came to the stream of globalization. Although both social policy and social sector spending were weak in the liberal frame of the Indian economy, after globalization, these became further weak. Gradual downsizing of the state and increasing privatization of delivery of services and goods made the social sector a relatively neglected sector and exposed the poor and the disadvantaged to more vulnerabilities. Under globalization, economic policy of growth superseded the social policy of redistribution and social justice. Such duality between the economic and social policies correspondingly impacted the expenditure on economic development and social development. This made the linkages between economic growth and human development weak. The structural factors like unequal distribution of income, assets and employment and rich and poor divide in the society exposed serious pathologies. The policy of positive discrimination in favour of the poor came to encounter the structural constraints. The poor people in our country highly depend upon the public expenditure for their overall improvement in living conditions. Hence, social sector expenditure assumes a crucial role in determining HDI. In other words Human Development and Social Sector Expenditure have linear relationships. This relationship is being ignored in recent times.

The positive correlation between social expenditure and HDI does not hold good at least in the state of Assam mainly because (i) it does not trickle down automatically; (ii) lack of proper planning and judicious allocation of social sector expenditure across space and across socio-economic and religious groups; (iii) poor quality infrastructure and (iv) increasing privatization of social sector. It can therefore be found that not only in Assam but also in all the states of the region, public expenditure in social sector development is reducing. There is no effort to restructure public expenditure in this sector either, in consultation with the sub-state institutions. As a result there has been skewed emphasis in resource allocation among different districts in this region. Many poor districts did not get differential treatment that they deserved.

Secondly, there has been much outcry for education and health sector development both from the state and the non-state

organizations, but the overall backwardness of the region in these two fields is exposed. The gap between the rhetoric and the reality being what it is, the regional scenario in these two social sectors has exposed to many pathologies including poor standard of education, poor quality of human resource and poor health status among the disadvantaged both in the urban and in the rural areas. Besides, there are visible rural-urban gaps in literacy and health, rural-urban gaps in female literacy, rural-urban gaps in drop outs including girl dropouts and so on. The only minor impact of education on the urban middle class has been changes in marriage patterns, higher age of marriage and lower fertility behaviour. But a large-scale change is yet to happen in this region.

Thirdly, the pathological symptoms of skewed education are found in poor capability of the women and the poor people of decision-making both at private and public spheres, larger involvement of the poor people in reproductive function in the households and increasing lack of access to productive resources of the land.

Fourthly, the Mid-day Meal scheme of the government has got serious policy implications for attaining the goal of universalization of education. But such goal is being stymied by many operational constraints in the programme. Poor quality of the Mid Day Meal, lack of variety and preference of dry ration possibly go against the very purpose of the scheme. The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan in Assam supplied text books upto Class VII. Students of Class VIII are still unable to procure some of their text books from the market. The package is incomplete without books and school uniforms for the children. Moreover the engagement of the poor children in income earning activities at the cost of education and alcoholic habits of the male members of the households discourage the children to go to schools. Such behaviour needs to be taken into account in the policy discourses. It is to say that the poor people in the region has to have larger dependency on the state for education. No amount of privatization of school education would help the poor people in this region.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In northeast India 'natural growth' process and 'induced process'

need be accorded weighted cognition based on the relative significance of the two processes. At the same time some of the criticalities arising out of the 'induced process' need be addressed with caution.

To initiate a change in this scenario, a holistic approach needs be undertaken so that the regional growth is compatible with equity and social justice. It needs not only an economic package for the people but also a strong social policy package and a strong political decision.

The economic package includes a number of components including investment in agriculture, multi-species cropping system in Jhum lands and valley-based rice cultivation. It should go along promotion of micro finance for poverty alleviation and food security in this region. It is necessary to diversify agriculture, service and manufacturing sectors in order to diversify occupations. The agricultural and industrial policies need be geared up to enhance employment and income opportunities for the local people specially for the local women. It is also necessary to combine indigenous and exogenous strategies for growth in this region, build connectivity of this region and to promote tourism for employment and income generation. Ethno development and micro planning are the right strategies for economic development of the ethnic groups in this region. A centralized and top-down planning paradigm has proved too irrelevant in this region as it could not be formulated with the participation of the people. It also failed to address the strategic needs of the local communities. Ethno-development and micro planning can be possible only when the bureaucratic elements in formulation and implementation of plan are weaned. There is need for a judicious mix of the special features of this region with the economic policy of the country. Besides it is suggested that the NEC needs to take pro-active role in development and that the economic policy needs to go to the advantage of this region. Side by side environmental education and population education are also necessary to ensure balanced growth and sustainable development.

In the policy front there is need to shifting 'Inner Line Permit' towards the international border in order to ensure just peace and to build citizenship by repealing the oppressive laws and acts imposed in the region. Population policy in this region needs be

devised in such way as to ensure sustainable growth. Illegal migration has caused havoc in the region. There is need to stop illegal migration into the region. Effective programming with necessary resources, manpower planning and human resource development of this region are necessary for that. This can be done through skill development and extension of technological education. Secondly, the National Population Policy needs be critically understood in the specific context of this region where population growth is primarily externally induced. Development and growth need to abide by re-distributive ethics, as these alone cannot address the real need of the people and ensure quality of life.

Refugee problem being one of the great problems, several measures including work permit system for the migrant community; Special Census Commission to identify illegal migrants; special jails for illegal migrants; birth and death rate registration; involvement of local people in the process of detection and deportation of illegal migrants; development schemes of the government to address poverty and bilateral and multi-lateral strategy for checking illegal migration are significant.

Rural-urban gap in development in the northeast particularly in the state of Assam needs a holistic approach. Developing satellite townships and growth centers in the outskirts of the city, creation of employment opportunities in the rural areas, efficient land management in the city areas and urban planning can to some extent reduce the city-based problems in the region. In other words there is need for a Master Plan for holistic development of the cities and towns in the northeastern region.

At the social front education and literacy have greater roles in regulating the reproductive behaviour of the people. A micro study on Karbi society has shown positive correlation between education and reduced fertility behaviour. It is therefore important that education needs be not only confined to family life education but also be focused on general education that can more meaningfully engage the people in productive activities than in reproductive activities. Some of the concrete suggestions that are applicable to the region as a whole are as follows:

- Cadastral surveys and land reforms measures should be carried out extensively.

- Economic and preventive measures need be taken to check massive destruction of forests and environment.
- Creation of more employment and income opportunities in both the plains and the hills so that hill-to-valley migration is checked to a certain extent.
- Proper scope for human resource development and human resource planning need be created that would really take the development task ahead.
- More stress needs be given on agricultural development as it is still the most dominant economic practice in the region.
- Practicing small family norms and increased use of contraceptives.
- Localization of institutions, government offices and institutes of national important in hill areas to address imbalances in economic development between the hill and the valley.
- It is also necessary to build and improve connectivity both within the region and between the region and the other parts of the country.

The economy of globalization can hardly become sustainable with growth alone unless it is guided by the principles of redistribution and inclusion. In the specific context of the region, multi-cultural assimilation, equity and regional harmony, civil society action in identifying illegal migrants and economic opportunities for the poor are more relevant actions for addressing the population issues.

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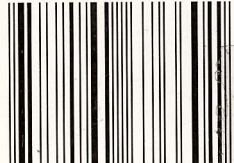


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