

CROSS-BORDER MIGRATION AND POPULATION GROWTH IN ASSAM**R. Chyrmang¹ and S. Kumar²**^{1,2}Department of Economic Studies and Policy, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, Bihar, India¹rikilenator@gmail.com, ²sanjay31378@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

As a prelude to such an effort, this study intends to examine whether cross-border migration in the past contributed to population growth of Assam? What could be the causes of migration to Assam? These questions need to be viewed against a broader background of the historical process of migration to Assam. The study finds that decadal population growth of Assam has been increasing in the post-independence era, higher than the national average, along with an increase in its population density. Though the decadal population growth and the share of immigration in total population have come down, but population density continues to increase which indicated that there was an absolute increase in the natural growth rate of population. This unaccounted natural growth of population could be attributed to the 'undocumented immigrants' and in other words the cross-border migration. An analysis of the 1991 and 2001 Census data on migrants also showed that cross-border migration was a strategy pursued for a better livelihood. The majority moved to rural areas and stayed for a longer duration of more than ten years and engaged in primary economic activities, mostly agriculture with an active involvement of their women folk.

Keywords: *Cross-border migration, Population Growth, immigration, undocumented immigrants, and primary economic activities.*

Introduction

The study explores the changes in the growth of decadal population in the post-independence period and the share of immigrants in total population and their religious composition across district of in Assam.

This study is organised as follows. The first section provides an overview of the historical process of migration to Assam during the Pre-British Period, the British Period, and the Post-Independence Period. The second section elaborates on the effect of cross-border migration on the growth of population of Assam and the third section discusses on the density and distribution of population across the districts of Assam and fourth section ends with conclusion.

Historical Roots of Migration to Assam

Migration of different ethnic communities is not a new phenomenon. Ethnic groups have left their original habitats in search of new ones in different periods of human history. Some of them went in search of food; some for territorial conquests and some to escape unpleasant conditions. Migration continues throughout human history either by compulsion or by individual choice (Prakash, 2007). The central arguments of neoclassical political economy 'push' 'pull' framework suggest that

people move from rural to urban areas with an expectation of higher wages (Harris and Todaro, 1970) and improved livelihood and that it is important to consider migration as a continuous process and trace its contribution from a historical perspective.¹ In order to trace the historical process of migration to Assam, we have divided the analysis into three periods: the pre-British, British and post-independence periods. The analysis is based on the review of studies by other scholars.

Pre-British Period

The pre-British period of migration history of Assam can be taken as 1228-1826, when most of Assam was under the rule of the *Ahom* dynasty.² They ruled over Assam for six hundred years. They introduced a system of compulsory service instead of taxation. The Ahoms followed the religious and cultural values of Tai, influenced by Buddhism. They brought with them values and beliefs of their Burmese kins and Chinese ancestors. They promoted great interaction with the native Hindu population through Satras and religious discourses.³ The Sankardeva (1440-1569) and Madhavdev (1489-1597) movements of Hindu reformation paved way for equality among castes and tribes.⁴ Even the believers of Islam, a by-product of the many Mughal invasions of the times were not discriminated against'.

Bhuyan (1949), states that the Ahom Kings encouraged those from outside Assam to come and settle in, as it had several advantages. Artisans, craftsmen, weavers, clerks, accountants, scholars and saints were freely allowed in. The Muslims came from north India and Bengal mostly as part of the Mughal expeditionary forces into Assam from the thirteenth century, and later were popularly known as Assamese Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley. A bond of unity between the Assamese Hindus and these migrant Muslims developed over the years and by the seventeenth century Muslims had become an indivisible part of the local population in the Brahmaputra valley.

During 1228-1826, migration was organized and well managed. Over time, the natives made a distinction between desirable foreigners who come to stay and become naturalized and undesirable foreigners.⁵ The native Assamese Hindus were apprehensive of losing their political power in favour of numerous migrants (Singh, 1987).

The British Period

The British entered Assam in 1702 as partners to the Ahom kings, who required huge investments in irrigation and flood control to increase agricultural production. But the British did not want to develop the agriculture sector as they found the land as most suitable for tea plantation and also good prospects for the exploration of coal and oil resources. In 1826, the British East India Company took over the region from the Ahom kings through the *Yandaboo Treaty*. Tea cultivation was introduced by the British as the ideal cash crop for the vast tracts of arable land in the plains and hills. They established the first tea plantation in 1837 at Chabua in Dibrugarh district. In 1840, the Assam Tea Company began its commercial production. From 1850, tea plantations rapidly expanded, consuming vast tracts of land run with indentured labourers.

The East India Company was looking out for cheap labour to supplement the locals. This led to the introduction of Bengali Muslim peasants, who were more than willing to move out of their habitat due to pressures on land in their

area. The flow of immigrants from Bangladesh should be seen in this context (Weiner, 1993).

The development of tea plantations led to the demand of more migrant workers from the eastern areas of Chotanagpur, Bengal, Orissa and Bihar (Griffiths, 1967). Subsequently, people from the western and southern borders also began coming in. Later, migrants entered through the western side and the East Bengali peasants, mostly Muslims, spread across Assam. While the increased production of grains and tea attracted the *Marwaris* – a trading community of Rajasthan, the construction works on railway tracks and roads attracted Bihari labourers.

The labour system during the pre-colonial rule was homogenous and well administered but it was changed during the British rule. While they abolished slavery in 1884 they also made a division in recruiting peasant labourers in the tea estates. The recruitment from Bodo tribes from outside the Assamese society created lots of problems amongst the two tribes. They also imported experienced labour from China. The British raised land revenue and surplus of production through the full rent paying (*khiraj*), the rent free (*lakhiraj*), and the semi rent paying system (*nisf-khiraj*). Some of these lands belonged to the peasantry (Karna, 2004). The British levied tax on everything, to flush out villagers to the plantation labour. The dissenting tribals or lower classes were exiled or imprisoned. They started getting indentured labour from present day Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh.

The British set up the northeast frontier for tribal population with an 'inner-line' policy. This policy laid down a line beyond which no outsider could move without the explicit permission of the district authorities and the possession of land in the areas was forbidden to non-residents. Further, when the tensions happened between the native people and the immigrant (mostly Muslims) over land rights, the British administrative response was one of segregation rather than a solution through socialization or adjustment process (Singh, 1987). In 1838, they drew up the *Wasteland Settlement Rules* (Guha, 1977). By 1920, the 'line-system' was introduced in Assam where a line was drawn on the village map and beyond that line were not allowed to occupy land.⁶ The

line-system dictated three areas: the open villages in which immigrants could freely settle; the closed villages in which immigrants were not allowed; and the mixed villages in which immigrants could settle only on an assigned side of the line. The '*line-system*' was to prevent alienation of land from the native farmers following their complaints about losing their land to the immigrant settlers (Kar, 1999a; 2006b). The British also adopted the policy of leasing land to their compatriots in Assam and by 1928, 16.29 lakhs acres of wasteland were allocated to planters. The 1921 census estimated that the migrants to tea gardens and their descendants numbered 1.33 million, about one-sixth of the total population of Assam. The *line-system* was not adequate to safeguard tribal lands and in 1939 the tribal belt was conceived as a barrier to restrict the settlers (Kar, 1999; 2006; Barbora, 2006). Though the British created a division between the natives and immigrants, there was still a relatively peaceful coexistence between these communities.

In sum, before the British period, there was migration of Muslims to Assam from other regions and it had created apprehension among Assamese Hindus that they would lose political power. During the British Period they encouraged migration to Assam to meet the labour shortage in the plantations. In the closing decades of the British rule, they also enacted rules to prevent the alienation of land by the natives to the immigrants.

The Post-Independence Period

The cross-border migration from Bangladesh to Assam in the post-independence period should be viewed against the backdrop of past history (Singh, 2008; Sarkar, 2010). With the partitioning of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, part of the Bengal Province dominated by Muslim population became part of Pakistan (known as East Pakistan). This put a break to the free movement of people from East Pakistan to Assam State and such migration became cross-border migration and illegal. However migration to Assam continued to take place and had become more intense with the liberation struggle in East Pakistan and birth of the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1972, with a highly visible

number of immigrants settling in the Brahmaputra valley. The native people started questioning on the issue of 'illegal' immigrant status.

Saikia (2005) argues that it is difficult to define the illegal migrants in this context, in view of the shared history of the British rule, the partition, the role of India in the creation of Bangladesh, and the provisions under the *Citizenship Act of India 1955*.⁷ The Assam Accord 1985 provided for regularisation of stay for immigrants who came to Assam between January 1, 1966 and March 24, 1971, while those who came in without documents after March 24, 1971, were considered as illegal migrants and to be deported.⁸ However, those born before July 1987 to these undocumented immigrants could opt to be Indian citizens by birth vide the provisions of Section 3 of the Citizenship Act which also provides for any minor child to be made a citizen of India, if the Central Government is satisfied of justifying special circumstances.⁹ These provisions together with the fact that most immigrants who entered before 1971 have not followed the naturalisation process to become Indian citizens, have complicated the issue of identifying the 'undocumented' immigrants.

Bangladeshi indigenous ethnic communities have kinship and strong cultural ties to many of the communities living in Assam (Roy, 2002). Some studies point out that the influx of migrants may have caused an increase in ethnic diversities in the state (Singh, 1987; Irshad and Das, 2003; and Sarma, 2006).¹⁰ Besides, the tribal groups, a few others have also come into existence as a consequence of prolonged interactions among cultures of the migrants and those of the native people. The pressure of population resulting in high man-land ratio has been widely hypothesised as one of the important causes of poverty and identity politics. The movement of people from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) has continued unabated, resulting in the visible reshaping and transformation of the socio-economic and political tensions among communities (Misra, 1999). The severity of resistance can be related to the magnitude of population influx (Goswami, 2007). Clashes between the migrants and the native population have been a

prominent feature of post-independence politics within the multi-ethnic community of the state (Weiner, 1978).

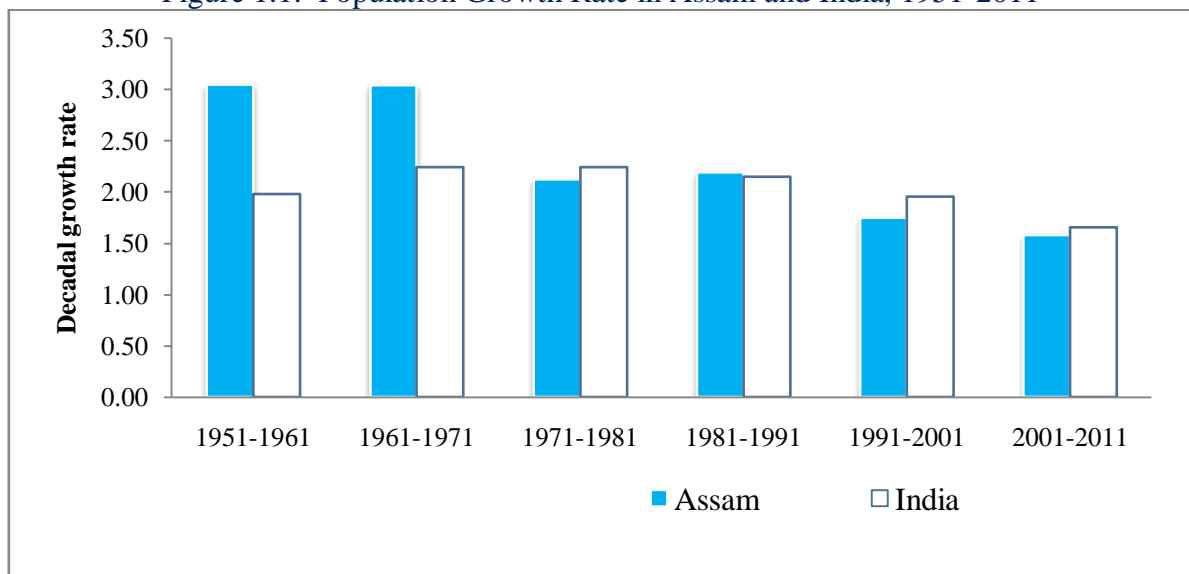
The situation between the native and immigrants started radically changing with the State's population growth rate being higher than the nation and with the high influx of immigrants from Bangladesh (Weiner, 1978; Misra, 1999). Since most of the cross-border migrants were Muslims, it would have added not only to growth of population in Assam, but also changes in the religious composition of the population. In the following section we look at cross-border migration, population growth and

changes in the religious composition of the population.

Cross-border Migration and Population Growth

The growth of population is not only due to the excess of birth over death rates, but also due to excess of immigration over emigration in Assam (Chaudhuri, 1986). A comparison of the decadal variation of population in Assam and India shows that it has grown at a rate higher than all-India in the 1950's and 1960's, but in the subsequent decades the rate of increase has been slightly lower than of all-India (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Population Growth Rate in Assam and India, 1951-2011



Note: The 1981 Census could not be held in Assam, so the decadal growth rate for 1981 is worked out by interpolation.

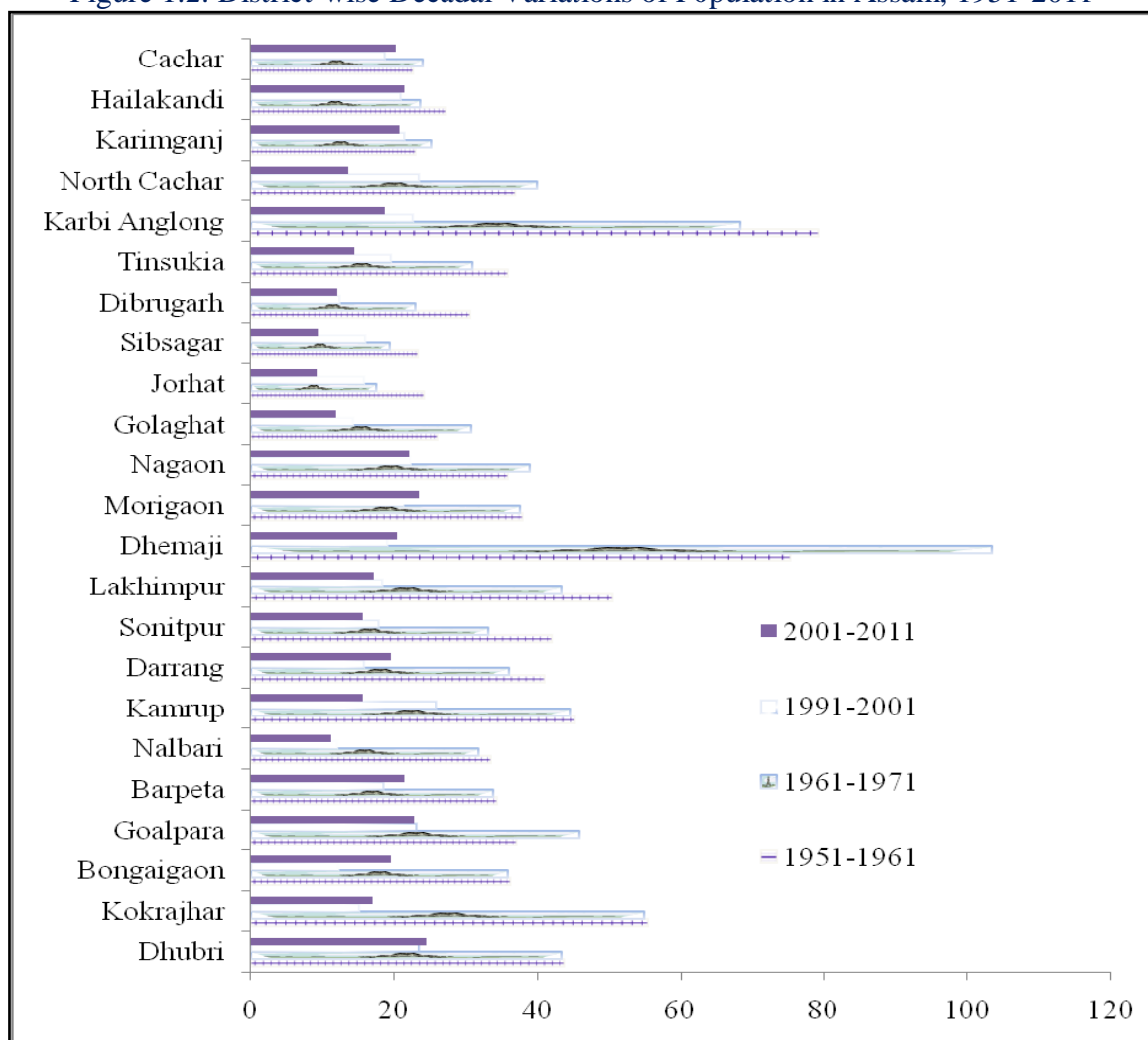
Source: Census of India

Most of the districts in Assam had shown an increasing trend in population growth during the period 1951-1991 (Figure 1.2).¹¹

It is relevant here to note is that the Muslim population in Assam is showing a much higher growth rate than the national average. Such a high growth rate can only be due to the regular influx of undocumented migrants from Bangladesh (Misra, 1999). As estimated by the survival rate method, the number of undocumented foreign migrants who entered Assam from East Pakistan/Bangladesh alone

during the periods 1951-1961 and 1991-2001 was 4.9 lakh and 7.4 respectively. An estimated total of 20 lakh undocumented migrants were living in Assam in 2001. This (20 lakh) was nearly 31 per cent of the total Muslim population (64 lakh) of Assam in 2001 (Table 1.1). The impact of such undocumented immigrants on the population pressure and ethnic composition is brought out by an analysis of the density of population across districts.

Figure 1.2: District-wise Decadal Variations of Population in Assam, 1951-2011



Note: Following the creation of the 4 new districts -- Baksa, Chirang, Kamrup Metropolitan, and Udalguri --, the rates for 2001 have been affected in 12 districts (including, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Darrang, Dhubri, Kamrup, Kokrajhar and Sonitpur).

Source: Same as for Figure 1.1

Table 1.1: Composition of Foreign Migrants in Assam: Legal and Illegal

Period	Total Foreign Migrants (estimated by survival rate method)	Legal Foreign Migrants (reporting by place of birth)	Illegal Foreign Migrants
1951-61	807210	314183	493027
1961-71	495461	330015	165446
1971-91	686344	40803	645541
1991-01	1261985	520985	740000
Total	3251000	1205986	2044014

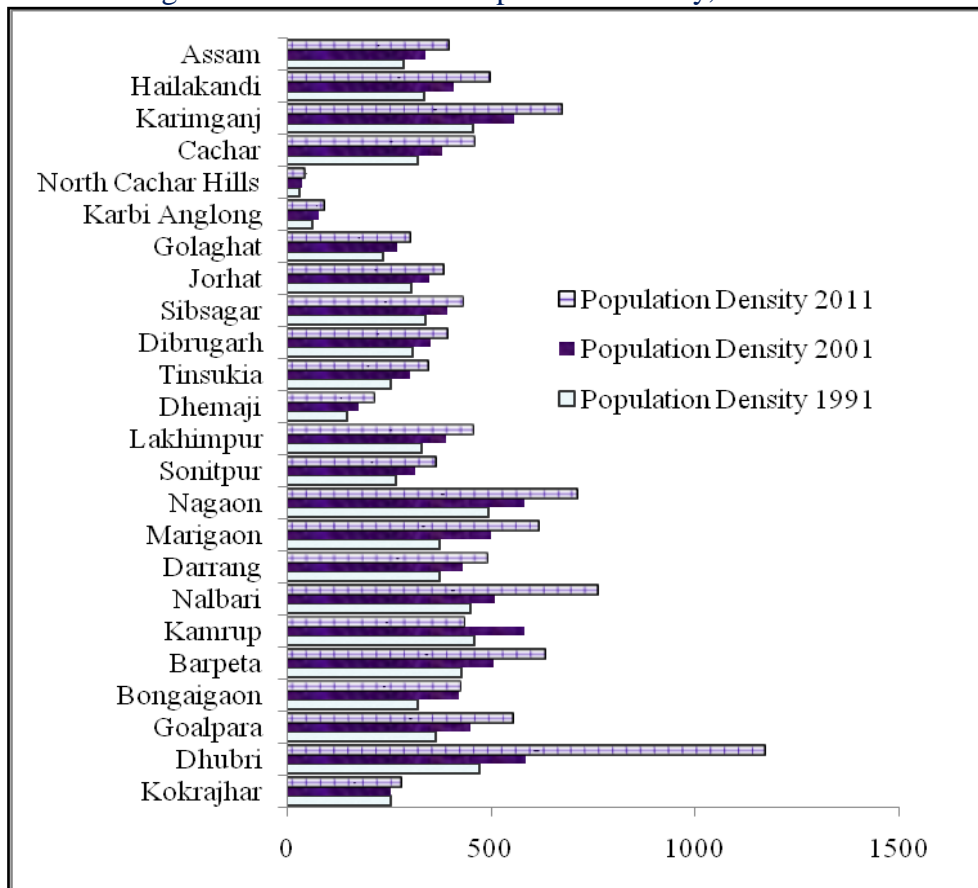
Sources: 1) A. Saikia, H. Goswami & A. Goswami: *Population Growth in Assam 1951-1991 with Focus on Migration*. 2) H. Goswami & J.K. Gogoi: *Focus Migration and its Consequences 199-2001*.

The Density and Distribution of Population across Districts

The density of population means the total number of persons per square kilometre. The

density of population for Assam has gone up to 397 as against 340 in 2001 with no change in the State area of 78,438 sq. km.

Figure 1.3: District wise Population Density, 1991-2011



Source: Census of India

The Census of India 2011 indicates that the density of population is highest in the district of Kamrup Metro (2,010) followed by Dhubri (1,171) and Nalbari (763) and the lowest density is seen in Dima Hasao (44). An upward trend in density has been observed across all the districts of Assam. However, the Muslim dominated districts such as Barpeta, Dhubri, Karimganj, and Nagaon, show higher increase in population density much higher as compared to other districts (Figure 1.3). The Muslim migrants tend to be more in those districts that already have a higher concentration of Muslim population.

A number of studies have examined the push factors behind the cross-border migration from Bangladesh. It is seen the migrants have been resorting to this as a livelihood strategy due to environmental problems that impaired the development of the Bangladesh economy. Further, their city dwellers were subjected to increased vulnerability through loss of livelihood which severely impacted the health of their population, especially so in the case of the low-income groups (Alam and Rabbani,

2007; Huq and Satterthwaite, 2008). The state of Assam that had an open border with the Bangladesh became the first place to experience conflict between the natives and the migrants (Swain, 1996; Singh, 2006). In this context it is important to examine the social characteristics of these migrants, when they migrate and where they migrate. We will provide some insights into these questions, using the Census data.

Census data categorises immigrants according to their purpose of migration as 'employment', 'education', 'business', 'marriage', 'move after birth', 'move with household' and 'others'. The category of *others* includes the migrants who do not want to reveal his/her identity due to fear of deportation. The duration of immigrant stay is further classified into four levels: 'less than one year', '1-4 yrs', '5-9 yrs' and '10 yrs and above'. In the case of Bangladeshi migrants in Assam, we find that among those who stay 'less than one year', and 'move with household' are the maximum, followed by 'others' and 'employment'. It also shows the same pattern

for the migrants for 1–4 yrs. The longer duration migrants— who stay for 5–9 yrs and 10 yrs and above are very high among those who ‘move with household’, ‘marriage’ and

‘others’. The majority of the migrants from Bangladesh into Assam prefer longer duration of stay and want to become permanent settlers and claim for citizenship rights (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: Percentage of Reasons for International In-migrants Duration by Place of Last Residence, 2011



Source: Census of India

The majority of the immigrants preferred to stay for longer duration stay in rural areas of Assam. Interestingly, the migrants prefer rural areas despite its low level of development. The

possible availability of agricultural land and forest resources could be factor a attracting them (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Percentage Reasons and Duration of Residence of Immigration by Gender: Rural/Urban Composition, 2011

R/U	Duration of residence	Work/employment			Business			Education			Marriage			Moved after birth			Moved with household			Others		
		P	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F			
R	<1 year	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
U	<1 year	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
R	1-4 yrs	5	5	5	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	5	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
U	1-4 yrs	11	11	6	2	2	7	7	6	11	2	3	2	2	2	4	2	1	2	2	2	2
R	5-9 yrs	4	4	4	3	3	5	5	5	7	3	4	3	1	1	0	2	2	2	1	1	1
U	5-9 yrs	4	4	7	3	3	7	4	2	11	3	2	3	5	4	7	2	2	2	2	2	2
R	>10 yrs	91	91	91	95	95	92	92	92	90	94	90	95	96	96	97	97	97	97	98	98	98
U	>10 yrs	84	84	87	94	95	87	87	89	74	95	94	95	93	94	89	96	97	96	96	96	96

Note: P-Persons, M-Male, F-Female. R-Rural, U-Urban
Source: Census of India

Table 1.3 shows that the majority of the migrant workers are engaged in agriculture and allied activities (73 per cent) with only 6 per cent in industry and 21 per cent in services.

The percentage share of female migrant workers in agriculture and industry in both rural and urban areas is more compared to their male counterparts. On the other hand, the percentage of males engaged in services in

both rural and urban areas is more than that of females. Overall, the proportion of migrant workers engaged in agriculture and related activities is more in rural than in urban areas. The migrant workers are moving to rural areas due to the work available in tea estates and

availability of agricultural land. They are uneducated and low-skilled and more easily absorbed in agriculture sectors (Sharma, 2006). The other non economic factors that influenced them include social network and cultural ties and the short distance between countries.

Table 1.3: Percentage of Sectoral Share of Immigrant Workers by POLR and Industrial Categories, 2001

	Primary			Secondary			Services		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Total	73.0	72.0	78.6	6.0	6.0	6.1	21.0	21.9	15.2
Rural	74.5	73.5	79.8	6.0	5.9	6.2	19.5	20.5	14.0
Urban	56.7	56.4	59.6	7.2	7.4	5.0	36.1	36.2	35.4

Note: **POLR**: Place of last residence.

Industrial Categories: Primary sector: A-Cultivators; Agriculture labourers; B-Plantation, Livestock, Forestry, Fishing; Hunting and allied activities. **Secondary sector:** C-Mining and Quarrying; D-Manufacturing and repairs; E-Electricity, Gas and Water Supply. **Services sector:** F-Construction; G-Wholesale and Retail Trade; H-Hotels and Restaurants; I-Transport, Storage and Communications; J-Financial Intermediation; K-Real Estate, Renting and Business Activities; L-Public Administration and Defense; Compulsory Social Security; M-Education; N-Health and Social Work; O-Other Community, Social and Personal Service Activities; P-Private Households with Employed Persons; Q-Extra-Territorial Organisations and Bodies.

Source: Computed from Census of India, 2001, Table D-8

Conclusion

The paper attempts trace the historical linkages of population movements to Assam from the 13th century onwards. The fertile Brahmaputra valley has been attracting both princes and peasants from near and far all along. We see the Ahoms from southeast establishing their kingdom and rule for 600 years with regular incursions by the northern Mughals. The 1826 saw the English East India Company taking over Assam from the Ahoms and the ensuing colonial period, is marked with its heavy demand for migrant labour for its tea plantations. The valley always lured the poor peasantry from the lower reaches of Bengal. The flow continued post-independence and even after East Bengal becoming part of Pakistan. We also saw the escalation of migration through the refugees during the Bangladesh liberation war.

The post-independence era showed the decadal population growth of Assam increasing higher than the national average along with increase in

its population density. The decadal population growth and the share of immigration in total population have come down. However; the population density continues to increase which indicates that there is an absolute increase in the natural growth rate of population. The natural increase of population is not captured by the available data, which could also be due to underestimation. The unaccounted natural growth of population can be attributed to the 'undocumented immigrants'. The majority move to rural areas with longer duration of stay for more than ten years and engage in primary economic activities, mostly agriculture with active involvement of their women folk (Census, 2011).

The change in the ethnic composition and the natural rate of growth of population reveal that cross-border migration shows a continuous process stemming from the historical connection between Bangladesh and Assam. It was only natural that the natives of the land were apprehensive of heavy influx of migrants,

with religious divides adding to the issues. The conflicts between these two communities mostly started after the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh. The issue of immigrants referred to as 'foreigners' by the native residents, came

to the fore when they were included in the electoral rolls. An accompanying key issue that needs for future research is the pressure on land resources, a noted change in the land utilisation pattern.

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Endnotes

¹ *Push Factors* are: violent conflict, floods, drought, poverty, unemployment, and lack of economic opportunity, social, political and religious discrimination. *Pull Factors* are: aiming for higher wages, employment opportunities, better education, better living, better health care facilities, family reunification, freedom of marriage, availability of land and forest for livelihood.

² The Ahoms belonged to the Tai race of Southwest China and came to Assam from Burma.

³ Satras are socio-religious institutions in the Assam region of India that belong to the Mahapuruxiya Dharma.

⁴ Sankardeva movement, more details was explained by Hazarika, A. (1998), *Karna Sankardeva Movement in Assam* in M. N. Karna (ed.), *Social Movements in North-East India*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, pp.206-209; Bhushan, C. (2005), *Assam: Its Heritage and Culture*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi. For Madhavdev movement, more details about the movement in Mahanta, K. C. (2008), *North-East India: The Horizon of Anthropology*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.

⁵ S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826* (Gauhati, Assam 1949), pp. 57.

⁶ An immigrant refers to the Muslim peasant labourers who came from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) before Independence.

⁷ The *Citizenship Act* defines an "illegal migrant" as a foreigner who entered India (i) *without a valid passport or other prescribed travel documents* or (ii) *with a valid passport or other prescribed travel documents but remains in India beyond the permitted period of time* (Section 2, Part-1.b).

⁸ We will term them as 'undocumented immigrants' in this thesis following the UN convention 1990.

- ⁹ (i) a person born in India on or after January 26, 1950, but before July 1, 1987, is a citizen of India by birth irrespective of the nationality of his/her parents;
- (ii) a person born in India on or after July 1, 1987, but before December 3, 2004, is considered a citizen of India by birth if either of his/her parents is a citizen of India at the time of his/her birth;
- (iii) a person born in India on or after December 3, 2004, is considered citizen of India by birth if both the parents are citizens of India or one of the parents is a citizen of India and the other is not an illegal migrant at the time of his/her birth.

¹⁰ Ethnic diversities: The present-day population of India is an outcome of the very long process of population movement of the subcontinent. Human groups with different ethnic backgrounds have entered the region at different points of time. Their immigration, their settlement in India and their later movements within the country have led to a high degree of intermingling among various ethnic and cultural streams. The ethnic and cultural diversities displayed by the Indian population today have acquired their distinguishing traits through this process of social intermixing (Bright, 2005).

¹¹ The population figures are based on 23 districts of Assam upto 2001 according to Indian Census. Assam now has 27 districts with the four districts created after 2001. The new districts are excluded from our analysis due to non-availability of Census data.