From Threatening Identity to Sustainable Development: Assam's Migration Challenge

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ABSTRACT

'Ethnic strife' in Northeast India has been based on political contestation over identity, migration and belonging. It can complicate development prospects and raise questions about sustainability. Migration has been a feature of human evolution. Assam has historically experienced the influx of migrants from both within the country and from the neighbouring countries that share borders with it. This has made the state preoccupied with the subject of identity politics, ultimately politicising regional development. The paper aims to examine how political contestation surrounding migration shapes sustainable development priorities in Assam. It examines the state's historical experiences of migration and ethnic politics, the political disruptions associated with migration related contestation and the implications for economic activity and long-term development planning. It also considers the relationship between urbanisation, migration and environmental pressures in Guwahati, particularly changes in land cover, groundwater recharge potential and the ecological condition of Deepor Beel. The discussion highlights how competing concerns over identity, demographic change and belonging can influence which development issues receive political attention. It argues that sustainable development in Assam cannot be understood through a uniform model detached from regional political, social and environmental contexts. With a primary focus on Assam, this article attempts to examine and assess the challenges that migration presents to "Sustainable Development."

Keywords: Northeast India, Assam, Migration, Sustainable Development, Ethnic Mobilization, Identity politics

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts qualitative analysis of secondary sources such as academic literature, government documents, policy materials, including urban and environmental studies to examine the effects of migration on sustainable development in the state of Assam. The theoretical framework of ethnic mobilization has been utilized to explain the relationship between identity based political mobilization and development priorities.

Development, Migration and Sustainability

The notion of 'development' varies with time, place and the demography of that particular

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region. Distinct theories of development like modernization, followed by dependency and underdevelopment were advocated with the goal of fostering growth in countries that have fallen behind the curve of success and advancement.

However, the 1987 Brundtland Report articulated the concept of "sustainable development",which revolutionized the paradigm by emphasizing development that meets the present needs and future generations. Sustainable development was described as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

"The debate on migration and development has swung back and forth like a pendulum, from developmentalist optimism in the 1950s and 1960s, to neo-Marxist pessimism over the 1970s and 1980s, towards more optimistic views in the 1990s and 2000s." (de Haas, 2010). Hein de Haas described these as "discursive shifts" in the social and development theory paradigm

The optimists believed that both the "sending" and "receiving" nation-states gain from migration, which balances growth by redistributing labor from rural to industrial, metropolitan areas and remitting money back to the place of origin. Since they bring knowledge and entrepreneurial impulses back to their home countries, migrants were viewed as significant change agents (de Haas, 2010). It leads us to consider examining whose needs and priorities are to be included when development is called sustainable.

Though the theories of development encourage immigration and movement, they are subordinated when the issue of "ethnic identity" is at stake. It reflects how political contestation around migration could shape which dimensions of development receive attention when dominated by the debate on identity and belongingness (Weiner, 1983; Misra, 1999). Sustainability concerns cannot be separated from this political context either.

Migration and History of Identity Politics in Assam

Development has been a complicated subject in Northeast India and one of the reasons has been the influx of migrants that the states receive from both outside and within the country as they share international borders with countries like Bangladesh, China, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar.

Assam has the largest population among the states in the region. Guwahati, its capital, is regarded as the "Gateway to Northeast" and the biggest metropolis in the Northeast. The state has undergone multiple divisions along demographic lines ever since the end of the 600-years Ahom reign by the British, merging it with mainland India. Assamese patriots felt outraged when the British overthrew the Ahom governing system, replacing it with Bengali as the official language in the state and hired Bengali Hindus to head the administration (Misra, 2019).

The colonial overlords hired laborers from southern Bihar after Assamese farmers refused to work on British tea plantations (Singh, 2022). Further, Sylhet, the muslim dominated region became part of Pakistan following independence, therefore the current state of Assam is only a fraction of what it was a few decades ago (Hossain, 2013).

This exposed the state to migrants which eventually led to the alteration of its demographic composition (Ahmed, 2005; Misra, 1999). It resulted in a population explosion. This unequal demographic shift quickly took a political turn, with different ethnic groups seeing the seizure and control of the state government as a means of concentrating state resources and seizing control of the state apparatus (Singha, 2018). Thus, introducing a "political climate in which questions of ethnicity and migration become central" (Weiner, 1983; Singha, 2018).

Having been marginalized by the migrant population in their own state, the Assamese returned to govern the state apparatus after independence. They attempted to regain control of other communities by favoring "sons of the soil" over other groups.

The Bengali Muslims and Bihar's plantation workers tolerated the imposition of Assamese culture and language, but the Bengali Hindus did not, and this led to an anti-Bengali revolt in 1972 (Misra, 1999; Singha, 2018). Given the animosity between Muslims and Bengali Hindus, it was not unexpected that the latter chose to side with the Assamese in an attempt to win over the state administration during the partition process out of fear of being sent to what was then East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh (Misra, 1999). This brief truce between the Bengali Muslims and the Assamese did not survive long, as they turned against the Muslims in 1977 for political and demographic reasons.

The illegal infiltration of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, its neighbor, became alarming when the number of voters unexpectedly increased in 1979 arousing ethnic tensions (Weiner, 1983; Misra, 1999). This resulted in a breakthrough of "civil disobedience" that paralyzed the governmental apparatus and economy (Weiner, 1983).

The agitation quickly took on an anti-Indian tone, as Weiner pointed out, with the Congress and Communist leaders reporting that Indians from other states who had migrated long ago were just as scared of being shut out of the state as the Bangladeshis. The demand for two citizenships, one for India and other for Assam was also made which ran against the Constitution and in response to that Giri Garu said “Get the Constitution changed then.” (Weiner, 1983).

Migration Politics Precede The Context of Development

The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA) sparked concerns about changing the demographic balance by opposing the Act's provision of awarding citizenship to refugees and persecuted populations in former neighboring nations based on religious lines (Sarma & Hazarika, 2020; Talukdar & Dutta, 2025).

The Act sought to offer citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Parsi, Buddhists, Jains and Christian immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who migrated to India on or before 31st of December, 2014 (Govt. of India, 2019). This stands to violate the deadline of 1971 set under the Assam Accord which was accepted as the basis for implementing the National Register of Citizens in order to track down the illegal immigrants (Govt. of Assam, 1985, Clause 5; Siddique & Ramachandran, 2024).

The previous and current protests demonstrate the ethnonationalist nature of these agitations. Development is put on the back burner when the state's political agenda is centered on ethnic

issues. The threat of ethnic marginalization cannot be eliminated by promising prosperity since what is progress if the community's identity is at risk? (Sarma & Hazarika, 2020).

These repeated political disruptions could affect the continuity of planning for social, economic and environmental concerns, halting the progress of a long-term sustainability project that requires commitment to become reality. These protests stall the economy as well as the political apparatus of the state.

Similar breakdown of everyday business was seen in the CAA protests as in the 1980s when the transportation of oil from within the state was halted to the rest of the country (Sarma & Hazarika, 2020; Bhaumik, 2007). This reflects the continued scar of the fear from the past based on ethnic lines and identity still shadowing the state in the present times.

Many residents accuse the governments of engaging in "vote bank" politics continuing to translate policies around the “Jati, Mati, Bheti”, obscuring all the other issues required to break the chain of ethnic polarization (Sarma & Hazarika, 2020).

Any measures to address the situation in other ways have been viewed suspiciously by the people as a plot to divert the issue of identity and favour those who they view as the aliens in their state. No discussion of a migration and development coalition could be settled for sustainability in Assam as long as the goal of deporting these people remained the main focus.

Additionally, the current situation does not help the cause either where the fear of an impending demographic change surrounds people of the state. It then becomes difficult for the state to build a sustainable approach to development that balances the demands of both natives and migrants when policy evaluation and execution fail in the broader context (Tacoli & Okali, 2002; Kiamba, 2012).

Urbanisation and Sustainable Development

Animosity based on ethnic lines can completely halt the idea of development. Although this contributes to the absence of a cohesive approach to the scope of sustainable development in Assam, there has been another contextual layer to the problem.

Satellite and sub-urban regions are created and expanded as a result of the rising population density caused by the fast growth of urban centers and the migration of wage workers to cities and towns (Tacoli & Okali, 2002). Migration and urbanisation creates questions about how urban development accommodates changing populations (Tacoli & Okali, 2002).

The fast development of Guwahati in Assam has drawn migration from the neighbouring countries and states which has led to rapid urbanisation creating sustainability pressures (Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority, 2010). The land cover area has been found to have increased between 1990 and 2020, largely at the expense of vegetation, fallow land, open area and to some extent, wetlands (Nath et al., 2021).

Similar studies associate urbanisation and population growth with the declining levels of groundwater and reduced potential of groundwater recharge (Nath et al., 2021). The Ramsar Site within the city, Deepor Beel, a significant ecological urban wetland has been reported to have lost approximately 22 hectares of water spread per decade (Koch et al., 2025).

Environmental deterioration brought on by rapid urbanization exacerbates conflicts among the state's indigenous tribes, who regard their surroundings as sacred and pristine (Baidya & Devi, 2024).

Even if the stages of development differ from state to state, urbanisation has been the prior stage in many of them and hence unavoidable. However it does not have to drive parallel to the goals of sustainable development. If state policies could manage to accommodate basic changes to provide for infrastructural support, these shortcomings could be eradicated in the long run (Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority, 2010).

Sustainable urbanisation requires more than infrastructure expansion as it involves the act of making development choices that adheres to the environmental limits and evolving social needs (Kiamba, 2012; Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2012).

Assam continues to receive a significant influx of migrants each year. In a region where ethnic demarcation has always been the center of political mobilization, economic, social, then other facets of development become unable to break free from this quagmire.

Conclusion

Development has been affected by a state's political, economic and social apparatus. The case of Assam illustrates that sustainable development could not be understood only through a uniform model detached from regional politics and demographic contexts (de Haas, 2010; Tacoli & Okali, 2002). Identity-based mobilisation shapes which development issues receive political attention and becomes a priority in the long-term. Migration in Assam has been entangled with ethnic conflict, cleavages, and more identity-based agitations rather than bringing about sustainable development. The state has faced severe protests in the form of ethnic mobilisation in the past as well as in the present, demanding development that puts identity concerns at the centre. The growing urban migration has led to the expansion of the biggest metropolis of the state, Guwahati which in turn has led to serious environmental problems in recent times, such as the depletion in the groundwater level and deterioration of the city's wetland, Deepor Beel. These issues have a long-term effect on the state's sustainability concerns. Migration in the state provides a distinct dimension to analyse sustainability challenges in the state. Thus, when it comes to understanding sustainability in Assam, the state's specific political, social and environmental context needs to be equally examined.

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