



An Ethnographic Approach to the Socio-Economic conditions of Assamese Migrants in Lucknow City.

Arif Rasheed¹

Daud Salim Faruque²

ABSTRACT

The Assamese migrant community living in Lucknow city faces unimaginable challenges. They live in groups of families in the slums developed on the basis of rent by their contractors. The contractors have to pay rent on behalf of the settled families, intentionally and with their consent, brought to Lucknow city as labourers. To earn their livelihood, they pick rag, classify rag, packing, and loading it for the transportation to the other places. The nature of their work and living standard limits their concerns only to be able to fill belly with exceptions though. The current paper follows the method of ethnographic research and tries to highlight the findings about their grass-root situation by directly visiting to the places where they live in make-shift houses. The researcher tries to present his observations about their living conditions, life-style, work, educational aspirations, business, and anxieties. Some case studies have been synthesized to support the findings.

Key Words: Migration, Poverty, Drug Abuse, Flood, Employment, Rag-picking

Introduction

Migration is a common phenomenon seen all over the world since growth centres often tend to concentrate in certain areas (Rajan & Chyrmang, 2016). Migration for economic reasons in India has increased in recent years, both according to the Census and NSS data. As per the Census data, the share of economic migrants in total population increased from 2.4 per cent in 1991 to 2.8 per cent in 2001. In 2001, 30.1 per cent migrants for economic reasons were intra-district migrants, 33.3 per cent were inter-district and 36.3 per cent were interstate migrants (Mishra, 2016).

The Assamese migrated to Lucknow along with their respective families prefer to live together. This is the tendency in most of the ethnic enclaves to build a strong community with women and children at the core. This helps to ensure the continuity of the community through the reproduction of cultural, religious and ritual norms, values and practices that lie

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

² Executive Director, Oxford Evidence and Interventions, Oxford, U.K.

at the heart of community life. Scholars argue that the phenomenon of ghettoization begins with a family facing certain circumstances. Once the entire family moves together from one place to another, other families follow too (Thapan, Singh et al. 2016). Once they interact with new societies, migrant communities construct their own social worlds (Mishra 2016). Just like rubbing salt to injury, the poverty ridden Assamese, who face frequent floods bringing along phenomenal number of physical, economic and natural property destruction also even face the problem of citizenship rights. The frequent and disastrous floods in Brahmaputra on annual basis snatch lands and identity proof from many as the native citizens. People in the conflict prone regions, natural calamity, religious clashes, communalism and poverty forces them to migrate with some aspirations of earning income and consumption smoothening. The uneven economic and regional development due to the absence of industries in the region and backwardness in technological know-how as ignorant citizens of state internalize the feeling of doing even the highly degrading work and living well below the standard of living.

Theoretical Perspective

The mainstream literature on migration, essentially, portrays migration as an inevitable and largely beneficial outcome of economic transformation. We have selectively presented one perspective which helps to look at contemporary experiences of migration and associated socio-economic changes on a larger canvas of development and economic transformation. Regional variation in per capita income has increased in the post-reform period. The studies conclude that in the period of rapid growth of the Indian economy, regional inequality, as captured through interstate variation has increased significantly. The phase of uneven development, poverty and migration relatively less developed regions are getting integrated into the circuits of global capitalism is through labour flows from less developed to developed regions. It should be possible to understand migration as part of the dynamics of uneven development under global capitalism, which creates, strengthens and also occasionally destroys centres of growth. As an inevitable outcome of this process of uneven economic transformation, labour from less developed regions tends to migrate to areas of relative prosperity. There is some evidence to argue that when the poor migrate, they usually migrate under distress, are paid less and are exploited through a variety of means (Mishra 2016).

Migration and Ethnographic Approach

People are not territorially fixed or sedentary beings; they move, for seasonal work, for education, for better employment opportunities and for a host of accompanying reasons (Thapan, Singh et al. 2016). Tumbe argues that India has been witness to a 'culture of migration' for over a century and the impact of this culture covers roughly 20 per cent of the population which is equivalent to 200 million people (Tumbe 2012). Migration is expected to increase as a result of economic growth. On the one side, economic opportunities for some have expanded the aspirations for many, and there has been a desire for economic betterment that has induced many to migrate. On the other hand, there have been new barriers, vulnerabilities and anxieties for the migrants (Mishra 2016). Expansion of Indian Constitution under Article 19 provides basic freedom to move to any part of the country, right to reside and earn livelihood of their choice. A number of economic, social, cultural and political factors vary over time and place. Proper understanding of the patterns of migration would help in understanding not only the nature of population redistribution, but also regional inequality, labour market and the process of urbanization, modernization and development. Migration from rural to urban areas has historically played a key role in the rapid growth of cities, and along with the reclassification of rural localities into urban centres, it continues to be an important component of city growth. Seventy-eight per cent of the people of the more developed regions lived in urban areas in 2011 compared to just 47

per cent in the less developed regions. The urban population in India, which was 62 million in 1951, increased to 377 million in 2011 (Bhagat 2016).

Concerns have already been shown regarding 'exclusionary urban growth' that has created barriers both-economic and non-economic for migrants to enter into megacities. The way cities are being organized as gated communities, the securitization of key aspects of urban life, shrinking access of common people to urban spaces and private provisioning of amenities, the rising costs of urban spaces and private provisioning of amenities, the rising costs of transport, beautification programmes that target slum dwellers are all manifestations of the neo-liberal restructuring and creation of global cities have brought in migrant workers from even the remotest and poorest regions of India, but the labour relations are structured in a way that migrant workers remain a floating, mobile labour force. They act as part of a reserve army of labour that depresses wages in the informal labour market, but they are not expected to be a part of the cities (Mishra 2016).

Study Objectives

The current study tries to highlight the picture of the migrants from Assam and their settlement in the make-shift houses at the margins of the Lucknow city. The study aims to synthesise information using ethnographic approach in which subject's narrative accounts and researcher's personal observation will be the sources of data. The researcher also obeyed the principle of confidentiality and decided to hide the names of the subjects to keep their identity intact.

Methodology

Social research may be defined as a methodical and systematic study of a subject with the aim to generate new information, verify the existing knowledge in that subject, and reach a new understanding (Srivastava 2004). Apart from the views of Srivastava the idea generated out of the study experiences of Wilkinson and Bhandarkar help the investigator to keep in mind that the unstructured observation is suitable for this investigation. The investigator took care about the guidelines of Wilkinson and Bhandarkar that to see who the participants are, how many they are and how they are related to one another; to understand the setting, know its overt appearance, the kind of behaviour it encourages, discourages or prevents and its social characteristics. The observer also needs to understand what the participants do, how, with whom and with what they do it. For example, the observer should know what stimulus initiated the behaviour, what the goal is towards which the behaviour is directed, what are the qualities of the behaviour (duration, intensity etc.) and what are its consequences? The best time for recording the data is on the spot and during the event. This results in minimizing selective bias and distortions of memory. The investigator was fully equipped with the instruments like camera, voice recorder; diary, pen and causal appearance. The method of ethnography has been considered to instill more realistic and robust approach in the process of collecting narrative accounts. Berreman was of the opinion that ethnography is a written report summarising the behaviours, beliefs, understandings, attitudes, and values of a group of interacting people. Thus, ethnography is a description about the most natural way of life and generally expected to give an overall view of the culture of a particular group of population. As such it attempts to cover all aspects of the culture of a given society. Everyone who does empirical research in cultural or social anthropology engages in ethnography as a process, though by no means does everyone report his research in the form of ethnography (Srivastava 2004)). The author visited the slum area where Assamese particularly reside. The data collected was through quasi-participant observation and interviewing. For this purpose, three areas of Lucknow were selected as the unit of study. These were *GayatriGomtinagar*, *UjriyawanandKannausi*. The researcher invested time among the Assamese by visiting their places of living, participating in their family functions e.g., engagements, marriages. The investigator held discussions with the Assamese

inhabitants. One of the Assamese acted as a bridge of communication between slum dwellers and the investigator helped in facilitating the communication. The following districts are the places from where Assamese migrated and settled at different pockets of Lucknow. The investigator collected data about the presence of people. The districts listed below (Table: 1) are the personal account of the Assamese shared with the investigator. The areas mentioned in the second picture are visited by the investigator.

Photo 1. Migrants from Districts Photo 2. Areas of Settlement in Lucknow

S. No.	Name of the Districts
1.	Barpeta
2.	Kaamroop
3.	Chirang
4.	Golpara
5.	Bongaigaon
6.	Navagaon
7.	Dhugri
8.	Kokrajhar
9.	Baksha

Table: 1. List of Assam Districts from where people migrated (Source: Field Study, May, 2016)



(Source: Field data collection, May, 2016)

Case Study: 1

'A' is 18 years old and the son of Y. He came to Lucknow when he was just 6 months old. His family lives in Lucknow since 2000. 'A' now is in a position to speak fluently in local language. Now it is difficult to differentiate him from Assamese or a local person of Hindi speaking. He understands the body language of local inhabitants, traffic rules, and the means to overcome when caught in case of breaking traffic rules. Furthermore, he knows the steps to follow in case of *ofchalan* and the case, if shifted, to the court. He is active, confident and social and has almost mixed in the age group of youngsters from local areas. The command over Assamese language has not been affected. 'A' also speaks well in that accent and wear a long chain in his neck and a piece of ring in his ear. It was shared by the interviewee that there is a tradition that young and lone son of a parent is socialized in a way to protect from bad-eye-view. The male members are considered to be protected through such cultural practices. It is no matter whether they are educated or uneducated. The same age group who is educated also wears ornaments on his body parts. The case and cause is same with other habitants too. These practices, thus, are normally obliged to and pressurised by mothers.

Case Study: 2

'P' is of 32 years of age and mother of four children. The elder son is named as 'H', 12 years, the other sons named as 'R' is of 10 years of age, 'N' is 08 years of age, and a daughter 'K' who is 07 years of age. The name of the father is 'D'. He and his wife are engaged in rag-picking and earn their livelihood on the same pattern as the labourer in the vicinity do. The

best part of their life is that both of them have decided not to let engage their next generation in the work in which they are. According to 'P', '*hum ne nishchaikiyahaikebachchoko is kaam me nahilagayengekuchchbhikarnapade, bachchoko pad hayenge*' (We have decided not to engage our children in rag-picking. We will let them study whatever pain we will have to take in the process of their study). 'N' and 'K' are now studying in nearby government school. They have just started their education. Do they face any difficulty or discrimination at school? They said no. Our children have never complaint about any such incidence. The elder sons, who has been a part of local Non-Formal Education School run by a religious organization within their vicinity, have now been enrolled in a smaller branch of religious seminary. At the time of discussion, the mother along with her four children showing the mark sheet of two elder ones to the Assamese facilitator. They have secured 95% and 75% marks in their exams respectively. Indeed the children were intelligent. In order to check their status of study at the school, the elder brother was requested to read the topic written on the Interview-Schedule. He read the topic with a little difficulty.

Photo 1. 'P' and her Children

Photo 2. Children on the garbage cart



(Source: Field Study, Ujriyawan Assamese Hamlet)

Case Study: 3

'T' is a 42 years old Assamese contractor who came to Lucknow in the year 1993. He was having only a meagre amount when reached to the city from Assam. He worked initially in rag-picking to survive and later become a contractor. 'T', thus, needs to go on regular basis to his native place to pursue groups of families to engage them in rag-picking. The settlement of new comers became the responsibility of the contractor who arranges for their stay. These families are those who either have taken debt from the contractor or out of poverty decided to shift from Assam and engage them in rag-picking. The contractor takes land on rent and in turn collects articles from labourer. Indeed the labourer works only for the contractor. 'T' shared that sometime contractor have to face loss when labour run away secretly. He was of the opinion that he cannot collect money if they encounter somewhere because they will not be having debt amount. However, he was satisfied that he is much better in condition since

his arrival to the city at the very first time. He is now living nearby the locality on rent basis. The ditching act by the labourer is committed by those families whose male members have engaged them in gambling. 'T' himself used to gamble. He, however, excuses by saying that he spent only a fixed and limited and already decided amount that only need to be spent in gambling and not more than that. He has to shift many places within the Lucknow during his long years of stay. The shifting depends upon the demand of the land owner and had to change places many times during whole stay in Lucknow. He also shared that a contractor has to have storage shades and during high wind it usually get destroyed. Before rainy season he has to maintain it again for the safety of collected articles, that is, *maalin* their business language.

Case Study: 4

'M' is 60 years of age, belongs to district Barpeta. He lives in *Kannausi* area of *Ashiana* since three years. The area nearby is also known as Aasu Nagar. The total number of households (hamlets) is 120. He lives in Lucknow since 30 years or '*Trish Saal*'. Thirty years is pronounced in Assamese as *Trish Saal*. He, however, had spent a longer duration of 27 years in *Chandan*, another Assamese locality, in other portion of New Lucknow. He came to Lucknow in search of employment. 'M' is now working as a supervisor on wage labour in Nagar Nigam to keep other localities clean. Besides, on demand he used to serve as a supervisor-cum-labour in LLJK Company. In this Company he used to put a colour mark on the vile of expired medicine. In return, of four days work in a month, he fetches approximately four thousand rupees. This work is assigned once in a month. 'M' performs regularly his religious obligations and used to clean localities. The gathering, interaction and sharing in Assamese language with his fellows at evening at the local shop keeps him mentally active and gives a sense of satisfaction of being among his own people.

Analysis of the Case Studies

The Assamese believe in bad-eye-view and practices some ritualistic activities even after coming to the cities like Lucknow. The practices suggest that they have not only come rather they have also brought the ritual practices as well. The practice is prevalent due to the emotional attachment of mothers often to her single son and the feeling of insecurity. The other assumption is that this does not require much investment. The children follow the practice keeping in mind the obedience of their mother. 'Every human is born free but he is everywhere in chains', quoted Rousseau. The Assamese do have talent to study but live with a number of limitations. Their basic necessity is to earn and to fill their belly. The concern of seeking education takes a backstage. It is hard to conceptualize the image of their children studying in some schools. First of all, most of them are unable to give thought to their children's study. Rarely, it is found as in case of 'P'. The hospitality and regard towards their guest was observed with the act she performed. She brought two bottles of cold drink from the shop and offered the investigator and Assamese facilitator to drink. The mother and children expectedly may occasionally be enjoying cold drink but they happily offered it to the guests. The investigator noticed that she went to her house and brings money to pay to the shop keeper. This suggests that in such localities people live on mutual understanding of credit and debit. The act also suggests that they may be economical for themselves and their children but arranges for their guest for best treatment, that is, *thanda* (cold-drinks).

Indeed it was surprising that a group of people understand the importance of education and wish to save their children from such pathetic conditions and let them live a comfortable life. The second type of limitation in acquiring education is limited and temporary nature of special schools either in the capacity of non-formal education or formal education. The discussion and the basis of case study reveal that the children and even whole population living in slums of Assamese has not been given attention and care. They have been considered as the burden seekers and the cleaners of society. The care has only been taken by

the brethren of the same religious community which within certain limitations forwarded help and support in the form of identifying and linking the talented children to the religious knowledge centres. A kind of non-formal religious school have been tried to open by the philanthropists in the vicinity of the Assamese group habitations. The efforts seem to be fetching the fruits for the future of the community. However, it does have some more limitations and discontinuity in education of the children enrolled due to the displacement of these people from the temporary settlement. The settlement of a year or more at a place get disturbed as the displacement order from the owner or the government time and again completely changed their mind, thought and the facilities of education and linkages for further education.

One of the significant analyses of the case studies tells about the shifting of places by the Assamese after a certain interval irrespective of Assamese labour or contractor. The other noticeable aspect was gambling which hampers their well-being. The other aspect was the step taken by the contractors who in case of decent earning does not wish to live in the same locality rather he used to live on rent at nearby houses. The Assamese quacks used to come to treat patients in the locality on regular basis also prefer to live nearby on rent basis. The teachers in schools run by organizations also keep a distance and try to live in slightly better conditions but not far away from the locality. The case studies reveal that both the labour and contractor have faced the same conditions of migration. The only difference is that one has become master and the other servant. Both have the same cause of survival from the situations of poverty. The nature of poverty in Assam is less preferable to them than poverty and the nature of work they are engaged in.

The economic aspect of Assamese has been tried by the investigator to create a scene in a narrative description of the situation. The socialization of earning population in India seems to have been done in thoughtless extravagant expenditure; multiple means of enjoyment refers to the availability of unbelievable sources of income attract them towards major and minor outlets. These outlets practice using disposable plates, bowls, plastic water bottles, cans bottles of beer, plastic and glass bottles of wine, cold drinks. The brands covers such as Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Thumps-up, Dew, Sprite, Limca, such as the Bagpiper, brands of shoes and sleepers like Bata, Red Chief, Woodland, Ice-cream flavours like Vanilla, Strawberry, brands of pack Juicesuch asAppy Fizz, Maaza, Chinese plastic polythene are in common use of sophisticated elite group of people.

The use and abuse of abundant number of packets thrown outside and the liquid poured inside the body is a common feature of the cities in the era of uneven development. The other noticeable characteristic of developed cities is the temporary but timely visibility of small, adolescent, and child bearing female beggars. The elite and independent, free-thinking people of varied sizes, shaped and de-shaped personalities impacted by the obesity caused by over-eating of fast food enjoys the evening. They also face on daily basis most frustrating feature of this wishful one-time eating group of beggars. The chain of alms seekers is unending. The informal system of eaters and non-eaters, the enjoyment and the dream of enjoyment, ego and the hurt of ego, the expenditure and the saving, the gathering and the isolation, the return of air-conditioned and luxurious houses and the resuming of lifeless-houseless house are a limited picturisation of two streams of a present uneven development. The glamour and clamour of evening and night is the time for both the group of beggars and reluctant givers.

The owner of luxury houses bears the features of decorated articles such as sofa-set, LED television sets, wall-clocks, pen-holders, ceiling-fans, tube-lights with choke, curtain-hanger, iron roads, water-taps. Apart from these the items made of plastic i.e., chair, dust-bin, rack, tooth-brush, comb, socket, three-plug, table, hanger, doll, and other articles are the assets of households and also get piled out when considered useless. The end of the use of

articles mentioned in a household gives an opportunity to the migrated group of underprivileged Assamese as rag-pickers. The life of the un-life articles get end for some but the same articles give the beginning of earning to these migrated people. Their day began before sun-rise, their work start before the opening of eyes of those who invest day-time in offices and evening at market. The following are the rates (Table 1) which is shared by an Assamese contractor.

Table 1. Rates of Rags

S. No.	ITEMS	RATE (in rupees) Per Kg
1.	Plastic Bottle	Rs. 10/-kg
2.	Mixer (Plastic, Milk pack (<i>Panni</i>), Chinese polythene	Rs. 8/- kg
3.	Polythene	Rs. 4/- kg
4.	Carton (Gatta)	Rs. 4/- kg
5.	<i>Raddi</i>	Rs. 1.5/-kg
6.	Tin	Rs. 2/- kg
7.	Broken Glass Bottle	Rs. 1/- kg
8.	Glass Bottle	Rs. 3/- kg
9.	Iron pieces	Rs. 8/- kg
10.	Slippers	Rs. 1/- kg
11.	Plain (<i>SadaRaddi</i>)	Rs. 3/- kg
12.	Hair (Female)	Rs. 1000-1200/-kg

(Source: Field Study, 18th May. 2016)

The thrown out articles in the dust-bins of the market place is searched by these migrants starting before the dawn and relaxes before the noon. The investigator shares the rates of the articles collected from faraway places. The rag-pickers sometimes touch the distance of more than 10 kilometres with a wish to collect more and more costly sellable disposed off materials such as plastic bottles, Chinese polythene, female hair and whatever they found on the way.

Conclusion

Out-migration of youth from the North Eastern Region (NER), on a large scale, towards far-off cities in other parts of the country is a recent phenomenon. A steady and steep increase in out-migration since 1980s, a trend that further strengthened in the immediate past, there has been growing concerns over the determinants and implications of such migration (Remesh 2016). The reasons or determinants of migration could also be grouped as 'push' and 'pull' factors, as done by North East Support Centre and Helpline (NESC&H) (2011). Such binary segregation allows to classifying the emerging situation of migration within the broad categories of 'compulsions' and 'attractions'. There is a felt mismatch between the demand in the job market and the weak local educational system, especially to meet the requirements of the new economy occupations and professional service sector (Lyndem and De 2004). Lower labour absorption capacity of local labour markets and perceived employment prospects in the urban centres together prompt the aspirant youth in NER to migrate to cities to explore better opportunities. The political unrest, violence and poverty of the region also often influence the decisions of youth in favour of migration. Most of the states in the NER have unrest and tensions which include religious, ethnic, communal clashes, tensions, between local and infiltrated population, insurgency, tensions between people army, insurgency and so on (Remesh 2016). Thus, the communal clashes, floods, political unrest, compulsions and attractions, violence and poverty, pulls the underprivileged to move from grave situations in search of comfort and earning. The dream of better life falls in somehow similar and little-bit situations of poverty, insecurity, illiteracy, but only a difference of hope. The hope of better days came to a halt and shatters sometimes when

displaced to another place of living within the periphery of the city. Thus, repeating the activity of settling down again with the feeling of insecurity of further displacement and the hope of some organizations approaching to facilitate the education to their children. In between hope and despair their rag-picking and other such degrading human activities are waiting for them to provide the means of earning. The uneven development requires equity for the all round development of the State and its citizens.

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