

## Urbanization and Marginalization: An Ethnographic Study of Assamese Waste-Pickers

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### ABSTRACT

*Urbanization is a sheer reality in the era of information technology and ultra modern world. The urban areas are accumulating almost all sorts of easiness of life. The growing dependability upon the machinery and manual work sought on the foundations of capital accumulation in urban areas stems another feature of city culture, that is, marginalization. Hence, the cities in India and the developing world are witnessing the features of a city as well as a village within the city. The urban areas, thus, record both the features in it. Luxurious life for rich and survival for poor has become a grave reality in urban areas. Efforts and struggles for survival bear the multiple pains not only for a generation but the generations to come. Humans in the trap of the phenomenon try to contain their personalities reluctantly to start a fresh in cities for the survival and sustenance of their generation. The article presents a narrative account of migrants' lives as waste-pickers. The methods used are mainly case studies supplemented by group discussion in Chandan, one of the areas of Lucknow where Assamese waste-pickers live and earn their livelihood with a constant fear of eviction.*

**Key Words:** Marginalization, Culture, Organized Structure, Waste-Picking, Contractor

### Introduction:

The survival does not involve only earning and filling their bellies rather it contains the proportions of minor wishes of clothing and eating rich food items, i.e., vegetables beyond potato, flesh beyond minor fishes, beverages beyond cutting-tea, travelling beyond general compartments, and many more. The lives of complexities, struggle on daily basis throughout lives, crushing of desires, keeping themselves disciplined and following the monotonous route of work and family lives made the distress people quite, calm and highly patient in their approaches towards group life and culture of their own. Assamese are migrated groups of such sorts who are concentrating to re-build their life and future generations. People are always the sufferers in one way or the other. The reasons of migration are many. The border area between two districts of states or countries always suffers in magnitude. The suffering may be concerning with infrastructure development, water and land agreement between nations.

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India and Bhutan have an agreement of sharing information of release of water from its dams, thus, waters flows down to Assam. In 2004 an artificial lake on the upstream of Kurichu dam, which is located north of the international border shared by Assam, burst resulting into sudden flooding of Barpeta and Nalbari districts of the state. Authorities of the two districts, Barpeta and Baksa said that there was no prior warning by Bhutan before releasing water. As a result, water flooded Manas and Beki rivers, the two principle tributaries of Brahmaputra River in lower Assam. The release of water by Bhutan was unannounced and together with the incessant rains affected more than 24,000 populations. (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati>).

As a result, the poor conditions of people get multiplied in such accidental ignorance. The fact is well known, that the incidence of poverty is higher in rural areas of almost all developing countries. However, in aggregate most of the people still live in rural areas. Thus, urban areas account for less than half about 30% on average of the poor. The population of developing world is urbanizing quite rapidly. According to United Nations, in 1995, 38% of people lived in urban areas, and this is projected to rise to 52% by 2020 (Ravallion, 2001, p. 435). The continuous plight of poor people led them migrate to urban areas. The same happens with unskilled, uneducated and burdensome rural people of Assam. The migration of Assamese attracted the attention of scholar to study migrant population living in cities like Lucknow.

The fact remains that the study of cities is in many ways a study of human development. The very term 'civilization' is linked etymologically to the word 'city', while 'urbane' is still a synonym for sophistication. The city is thus a concrete expression of accomplishment, a magnet to which migrants are still attracted from rural areas, places where they can search for work and find better medical care and higher education. It has become a cliché to point out that, for the first time, our global population is now more urban than rural. While this is correct, it also hides enormous variations from nation to nation, some of which are still predominantly countries of small towns and rural production, while others are almost entirely urbanized. For many critics of urbanization, it is this development that has shaped our planet in negative ways, destroying natural habitats and species in the process. Yet this overlooks the reality that cities are efficient places in which to live and to work, and in which to obtain goods and services. These are the places where things happen—economies, government and human societies evolve for the most part in urban places and it is there that innovation occurs, remedies are tried and tested, and people interact with those that are like them and those who come from half a world away (Kirby, 2012, p. S3).

Achieving the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the international community's unprecedented agreement on targets towards the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, will depend to a large extent on how well developing country governments manage their cities. Cities are currently home to nearly half of the world's population and over the next 30 years most of the two-billion-plus person increase in global population is expected to occur in urban areas in developing world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, just 16 cities in the world—the vast majority in advanced industrial countries—contained a million people or more whereas today, almost 400 cities contain a million people or more, and about seventy percent of them are found in developing world (Cohen, 2006, p.64).

For many observers, however, the greatest concern is surely the massive increase in the numbers of the urban poor. Available data suggest that in a large number of the world's poorest countries, the proportion of urban poor is increasing faster than the overall rate of urban population growth. Yet each year cities attract new migrants who, together with the increasing native population, expand the number of squatter settlements and shanty towns,

exacerbating the problems of urban congestion and sprawl and hampering local authorities' attempts to improve basic infrastructure and deliver essential services (Cohen, 2006, p.64).

Thus, in this context, the current paper strives to ethnographically present a picture of Assamese migrants and a portion of their life as migrants in the growing capital city like Lucknow. The study population is mostly migrated from Barpeta district of Assam and settled down temporarily in different pockets of the capital city of Uttar Pradesh.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Manuel Castells captures diversity and global reach under the label 'the Fourth World'. He observed that 'a new world; the Fourth World has emerged, made up of the multiple black holes of social exclusion throughout the planet. The Fourth World comprises large areas of the globe mainly impoverished rural areas of Latin America and Asia and Saharan Africa. But it is also present literally in every country, and every city, in this new geography of social exclusion. They are the majority in some areas, the minority in others, and a tiny minority in a few privileged contexts. Everywhere, they are growing in number, and increasing in visibility. The selective triage of informational capitalism and the political breakdown of welfare state, intensify social exclusion.

### **Objective of Study**

The objective was to peep in to the lives of Assamese in Lucknow through scientific approach. The migrated group of people from faraway places of Assam finds their shelter in varied pockets of Lucknow city. One of the features of Assamese is the migration with family. The women and children, thus, migrated to the city with a particular objective of earning with husband. The city provides opportunity for women, children to equally participate in the system of earning through waste-picking. The group of people keeps earning as the only objective of their migration. Hence, it is pertinent to find out features of their life and livelihood before and after migration.

### **Methodology**

The technique adopted in the process of data collection was primary qualitative method. The data collected and presented in current paper is through direct observation and case studies. As a result, the research paper is prepared by taking into consideration a detailed case study and it's analysis to present lives of Assamese migrants in growing urbanized capital city of Uttar Pradesh.

### **Review of Literature**

Review of literature enables the researcher to update his knowledge and understanding of research topic. Literature review indeed is a logical presentation of earlier researches and work. This workout aims at examining the theories, various interpretations, and explanations produced by earlier thinkers and researchers in significant discipline. A scientific piece of research is supposed to attempt to fill identified gaps by new interpretation and fresh empirical evidence. The present researcher, in view of the guiding principles, has tried to go through possible and available work and literature on the research topic.

**Rowena Robinson** in her paper, "*Religion, Socio-Economic Backwardness & Discrimination: The Case of Indian Muslims*" says that the paper is based on data about Indian Muslims collated from the Rajender Sachar Committee Report (SCR) as well as from the 2001 Census and other recent materials. It was done to relate the themes of marginality, human security and discrimination on the basis of religion. The fact remains that the literacy and educational status of Muslims is particularly low. The literacy rate among them is far below the national average and this gap is greater in urban areas and for women. She also argues that the Mean years of Schooling (MYS) and attendance levels of Muslims are low in absolute numbers as well as in comparison with other socio-religious groups.

**Steven Wilkinson** in his article *"A Comment on the Analysis in Sachar Report"*, analyses that the Sachar Committee was asked to do two things. It was charged with collecting systematic information on Muslims' socio-economic status. The other responsibilities were public and private sector opportunities for Muslims in comparison to other communities. The Committee was asked to consolidate, collate and analyse available information/literature to identify areas of intervention. The intervention was basically by the government to address relevant issues relating to social, economic and educational status of Muslim community. The author appreciates that the Sachar Committee deserves much praise for sparking much wider public debate on the causes of Muslims' relatively poor socio-economic status and the steps needed to improve things. Wilkinson explores the methods used in the report but critically assesses that the report tell us far less than we might wish.

**Rowena Robinson** in the article *"Indian Muslims: The Varied Dimensions of Marginality"*, examines the social, political and economic profile of Indian Muslims emerging from the SCR. This article also attempts to relate the SCR data and other documents to the human security and development concerns of Indian Muslim communities. Within this framework, questions of affirmative action are also raised. Muslims are clearly on the margins of the structures of economic, social and political relevance in India.

**Zoya Hasan** in her article entitled *"Reservation for Muslims"* argues that the affirmative actions are taken to address the socially, disadvantaged and discriminated group of society. This will encourage the disadvantaged sections of society to enjoy equal opportunity for participation in governmental institutions. The government and courts have rejected the use of religion as a criterion for selecting minority groups as backward for the purpose of special safeguards for the disadvantaged. It was done on the basis of reasons that it was incompatible with secularism, it would undermine national unity and it is believed that Muslim community in the absence of caste system within the community it is not entitled for special measures.

**Manish, K. Jha and Pushpendra Kumar** in the article entitled as *"Homeless Migrants in Mumbai"* find that labour migration from rural to urban areas is a persistent feature of developing countries like India. Mumbai, like many big and thriving cities, has been attracting a large number of migrants from all over the country. A substantial chunk of the migrants, belonging to poor working classes, are unable to rent or own a home in the city. They are forced to live either in public space such as pavement by the roadside, or at workplaces, or in slums or shelters of various kinds which do not qualify to be called homes. The migrants are predominantly from rural areas across the country, constituting two-thirds to three-fourths of all migrants. Work/employment and business were cited as the main reasons for migration in the 2001 Census.

**Mitra, Iman Kumar** in his article entitled *"Recycling the Urban, Migration Settlement and the Question of Labour in Contemporary Kolkata"* seeks to bring together two aspects of life, livelihood, and habitation practices in the city-the phenomenon of urbanization and that of rural-to-urban migration. Hence, the chief purpose of this exercise of writing an article is to investigate the location of the category of "migrant worker" in the broader and adjacent discourses of urbanization, to propose a scheme of research which would explore the politics of defining and stabilising this location, and find out its implications for social justice for the urban poor. The particular area of justice pertains both to the incidence of violence against the so-called "outsiders" perpetrated by the self-proclaimed "sons of the soil" and the vulnerability of the workers coming to the city in search of a better life and better employment opportunities in the face of these incidents.

**Bagchi, Debarati** in the article entitled *"Street Dwelling and City Space: Women Waste Pickers in Kolkata"*, this article locates the migrant women waste pickers among the

pavement dwellers and homeless people residing in a particular area of Kolkata. The article seeks to understand the processes and structure of migration, occupation, life and labour conditions, and vulnerabilities of this group and whether they have access to infrastructure and resources. The author by the study seek to understand the territory, family structures, and the pattern of shifts in occupation taking place in and around a particular dwelling area.

### **Culture and Change: A Life at Lucknow**

The researcher visited the area for the purpose of data collection. The researcher accompanied with Mr. Jamaluddin, 48 years, wearing *Kurta*-apron (*Lungi*), Islamic skull cap, small beard on the face and a muffler wrapped from head to face suggested to visit the market in the village, "Gaon". They call their ghetto as "Gaon". The researcher with him began moving on mud road full of scraps, mud clad innumerable number of scattered polythene, pieces of clothes in dirt, land somewhere wet and rest is uneven.

The scene seems to be just opposite to the look in modern scenario, where almost all people wish to have on-road house, shops, offices so on and so forth facing the front of the road. But the Assamese do it just opposite. The front is used as the back of the house. The researcher observed and found only shops, which opened its front on roadside. On both side of the road, back portion of huts (*jhuggies*) was on front and the entrance was from inside. The rented land is uneven and concrete construction is not feasible, the habitants, thus, utilise land as a plain paper sheet and free to form settlements as per their convenience. Everything i.e., huts, shops, market, source of water supply, open sky hearth (*chulha*), partitioned rooms, open-sky toilet, so on and so forth are temporary in nature.

Hence, Assamese do not try to invest much on concrete settlement. In fact, they are not entitled for that. The land is on rent; the nature of employment is filthy and is being performed out of compulsion. As a result, they construct bamboo walls covered by worn out *Sarees* and other materials. This is done to secure privacy and space to collect, categorise, segregate, count, pack and transport waste (*maal*) through the public carrier frequently visiting the "Gaon".

It was the place where we get stopped and sat down inside the bamboo-clad-shop. The shop was facilitated with wooden benches and tables. On the front a dish television was there to entertain, educate through news to customers. Two women were engaged in crushing rice through the help of an indigenous, traditional method of crushing rice. The wooden instrument is called as "Dhekchi". "Dhekchi", in this traditional instrument a heavy log supported by two medium size logs was pushed through the help of leg. A woman was pushing it while another levelling uncrushed rice to get properly crushed and converted into powder. The rice powder was at the same time being separated through strainer for final use of cooking. The crushed rice is used to prepare rice eatables called as "Peetha". The eatables like *Peetha* and tea are common and cheap items of refreshment affordable by small children as well. All ages of people enjoy the eatables at tea-shop. In order to understand the condition and faces of poverty the author presents a case study and its analysis to find out the past and present compulsions which forced them to join hands in waste-picking merely by migrating from rural to urban milieu just for survival.

### **Case Study 1:**

The researcher took an interview of an Assamese and presented in the form of case study and analyses the collected data.

#### **Landlessness**

Noor Mohammad, age 52, inhabitant of a village in district *Barpeta*. He is of rural origin. The condition of his family was very poor in his native district. He is suffering from

hearing problem. Noor Mohammad does not possess any yard (*Bigha*) of land even he is not having his house. He was in a very poor condition and lived in a makeshift house in his village. The sources of earning were very less. He had to work for whole day to receive a kilogram of rice and a few coins. For earning he used to go to several miles on foot.

#### **Flood and Dead Body**

At the time of flood in 2004 his area was dip in water up to 3-4 feet. In the same year his father died and they had to go for 4-5 miles away to bury his body at a raised land where water did not reach. The responsibility of household along with his siblings was on the shoulders of two brothers including him as well.

#### **Employment at Native Place**

Noor Mohammad had started another work of caretaker at the house of one master Sajid-ul and received Rs. 100/- per day. He worked over for many years and had taken a lot of efforts and pain to let study his younger brother. He got employment (*Chakri*) and separated himself from others after completing his graduation and left them at their own fate. Thus, he decided to come to Lucknow on the pursuance of his elder brother and reaches Lucknow with his wife and small children.

#### **Employment at Lucknow**

He says that it was the time when he was not having even such amount of money to purchase salt for the family. In that situation neither money nor hut was there to live and eat. Out of compulsion they started working as waste-pickers which do not require investment. Now their life has changed and they do have their own rented hut, shop, daughter get married, and still earning to eat three times full of belly. They are of the opinion that they are happy and lives better than the life of his younger brother at Assam.

**Photo 1: Dumping ground at Chandan: The Assamese female waste-pickers**



(Source: Field data, Feb. 2018)

### **Analysis of the observational account of Assamese Migrants'**

The observational account of Assamese in Chandan ghetto, tells a story of distress migration. The distress is of multiple-faces. The legacy of their being people with stigma, negligence by state, status of poor origin, non-represented in assemblies and Parliament, association with a particular community and stigmatised as responsible for partition of land, and moral-religious degradation, lack of leadership among them and loss of hope of receiving international help and support keep them mum and compelled to think about survival not the mean work and dignity. The migrants are mostly uneducated; engulfed with issues at family, community and country level.

Assamese in rural areas observed to be without land resource and even without shelter. In such a juncture, migration to other city is not a challenging task. The hope, however, is always a motivating factor behind moving to city with human resource of the family. The waste-picking offers work without any condition. A person need not to be skilled, educated, civilized, rather only in grave need of its sustainability. The picking of waste does not require investment rather it pays back handsomely. The hard-worker, disciplined, and target-oriented people have a good weight in the field of waste-picking. The migrants from Assam easily convince them to engage in the work, out of sheer need of earning and living a life with full belly. They console them to remain in work with a hope of saving money, eating food items, wearing cloths, and have a shelter. The waste-picking provides opportunity not to a particular kind of migrant but all physically fit Assamese migrants. They earn multiple of currency notes here on daily basis in comparison to earning at their native place. Thus, the life at ghetto in city in monetary sense is better than the life in rural area.

The fine part of their migrant life is the resemblance of Assamese village flavour within the city. They may have not to compromise much about their culture of food and clothing, and community feeling. They do not feel much burdensome in the presence of Assamese quacks, Assamese *jadi-buti* for treatment of disease, eatables, marriage ceremonies within the Assamese migrants, availability of female Assamese cloths, betel-nuts from Assam, availability of fish-rice, and bamboo-clad all housing and storage structure. Hence, slowly and gradually they assimilate in city culture, Hindi language speaking and above all growth of their children and saving by waste-picking hides all short comings of filthy work. They say that any work is not small, small is our thinking.

### **Conclusion**

The era of agriculture economy of many countries of developed and developing world has witnessed a paradigm shift and rush to industrial economy. The shift normally brings motivation, pursuance for change in attitude, thinking, vision and adaptability for new arrivals. There are people or groups of people who are quick in reception of new additions in either agriculture economy or industrial economy or in use of information technology. Hence, people, place state and nation experiences such practices. Some receives updated knowledge with open heart, mind and rest pointed out doubts and question upon its utility. The differentiation starts from here and a gap could be seen in varied spheres of life. The differentiation might be of money, power and survival. This gave birth to marginalisation and compulsion for acceptance of anything just for survival. Thus, the fourth world came in existence in almost all over the world. The living conditions compelled the poor and marginalised not to have a concrete and settled means of livelihood as well as many more threats in life on routine basis.

The migrants stay is temporary in essence; the citizenship right is at stake, surety of livelihood is uncertain. More spatially concentrated and visible forms of urban poverty are likely to generate new pressures on governments to respond and in ways that may or may not be coincident with good policies for overall poverty reduction (Ravallion, p. 436). This

happened with migrant Assamese. If well managed, cities offer important opportunities for economic and social development. Cities have always been focal points for economic growth, innovation, and employment. Indeed, many cities grew historically out of some natural advantage in transport or raw material supply. Cities, particularly capital cities, are where the vast majority of modern productive activities are concentrated in the developing world and where the vast majority of paid employment opportunities are located (Cohen, 2006, p.64). Thus, Assamese found it safe to migrate with family members to the city like Lucknow to work which does not require education, money for initiating work, concrete houses to live so on and so forth. However, a minimal number of migrants are able to think upon education of their children and coming out of the work in which they are engage. The first and foremost objective of migrants especially distress migrants is to think for survival and not education, religion, or nation.

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