Internal Displacement and Politics in the State of Assam

Anindita Dasgupta,
Center for History, Politics and Strategy,
The National University of Malaysia.

For a country as large and populous as India, the problem of internal displacement\(^1\), whether conflict, development or environment-induced, assumes a far greater significance in the post-colonial years than that of refugees, though the latter continues to occupy centre-stage in academic discussions and much of policy-making. While issues such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan or the departure of the Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir have drawn world attention to internal displacement in India\(^2\), there are other lesser known corners in the country where massive internal displacement has been going silently and unremarked for almost a hundred years. One such remote corner is the Northeast Indian state of Assam, which has witnessed large-scale internal population displacement following conflict and/or environmental changes\(^3\).

Characterized as “miniature Asia” by scholars because of its astounding demographic plurality (with the Asamiyas as the majority group), Assam had historically been on the migration interface of diverse population streams. This is what has created the great differentiations of language, religion, culture and society that we see today in Assam state. This in-migration trend has continued into current times, with Assam receiving a large number of refugees from East Bengal/East Pakistan, Tibet and Burma professing different religions, speaking different languages and bearing different cultures. Lucien Febvre used to say “France’s name is diversity” and after him one can say the same about Assam, for in Assam one continues to find a dazzling triumph of the plural and the heterogeneous rarely matched elsewhere in India. And it is this stubborn plurality that gave rise, in the post-colonial years, to a number of militant identity movements in the state – ethnic strife often resulting in ‘cleansing’\(^4\). This has led to an immeasurable sorrow, both in terms of lives lost as well as population displacement. In case of Assam it is in-migration over the longer period of time that has led to violent upsurge of reaction and displacement. Often, it was the descendants of the in-migrants who were displaced.

But while conflict-induced displacement is of more recent origin, an older problem that continues to engage attention of local social scientists, political parties as well as the general public, is the perennial flood-induced internal displacement of tens of thousands of people in Assam’s plains. Every year, the gushing waters of the Brahmaputra, originating in the Himalaya and flowing across three different countries, inundate and erode the river-banks and river islands on which thousands survive carrying out subsistence agriculture. The erosion of the river banks and **chars** (midstream river islands) displaces thousands of people, who then migrate to neighboring ‘mainland’ areas in search of home and livelihood.

Powerful and swift-flowing, the Brahmaputra carries with it a great rolling mass of sand and clay which makes its flow a powerful force for erosion: it meanders hollowing out the concave banks, creating troughs of deep waters there, while leaving **chars** and sand-bars on the opposite side. The region's tectonics and geology, as well as the climate of the Brahmaputra basin combine to generate high erosion rates and river-channel changes, making the valley extremely flood-prone. It is because the river basin is so densely populated that the population here is so vulnerable to natural disasters, and so easily displaced.

There are two critical aspects to the problem of internal displacement along the Brahmaputra in the Assam Plains. Firstly, even at the best of times, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are unwelcome in any society anywhere in the world, and this is true of the **char**-displaced as well, as they try to rebuild a life in the mainland of Assam. Secondly, the problem of IDPs in this instance is intrinsically linked/overlapped with the politically contentious issue of illegal immigration into Assam from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh\(^5\).

Most of the IDPs from the **chars** of the Assam plains are Muslims of East Bengal origin settled in Assam since the colonial years\(^6\), a community that is commonly suspect for being latter-day illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Their appearance in the mainland towns, following large-scale floods and erosion, is
generally accepted as simple proof of fresh illegal immigration from across the leaky international border in south Assam whereas there is ample evidence to show that they are not all ‘economic refugees’ from Bangladesh but a large number are ‘internally displaced persons’ from Assam’s own sand banks and river islands. The refrain in Assam throughout the five decades of postcolonial politics has been the threat the state’s indigenous people are facing from a steady and illegal immigration of impoverished, fortune-seeking Bangladeshis. Significantly, in spite of protracted anti-immigrant social movements (and backlash) over the last two decades, there has been little movement by the Indian State towards a political settlement of the “Bangladeshi” problem in Assam and new dimensions are added to this fear when thousands of poor, sarong-clad Muslim peasants from the far-flung riparian areas spread into the Assamese hinterland.

The political elite of Assam adds a political overtone to what is primarily a humanitarian and socio-economic problem, which partly explains the low priority given to the relief and rehabilitation of the char displaced, or the lack of effort to acknowledge and address the extent of environment-induced internal displacement in the state. This ‘overtone’ also reflects the gut-fear of a small, economically weak community – of losing political power and land to a continuous inflow of illegal immigrants. At a macro-level, the point has also to be made that the fears of the indigenous Asamiya population derives from the non-resolution of one of the many un-finished businesses of India’s Partition: the inability of the nation-states to address the matter of what to do with the those who illegally cross the ‘new’ boundaries of the Subcontinent. It is the non-resolution of this matter which has led to an overwhelming fear and suspicion of the “outsider” in Assam, a fear that spills over to the issue of internal displacement as well making it the most contentious and continuous political issue in the state.

The History

The 1826 colonial conquest of Assam opened up the province as a land frontier, attracting large-scale immigration of both labour and enterprise from the neighbouring provinces of the Raj, especially Bengal. Since the 1890s, the British also encouraged a slow but steady migration to the uninhabited Assamese tracts of impoverished Muslim peasants from the adjacent overpopulated areas of East Bengal. Back then, the Asamiya middle class welcomed this entry of productive labour and skills into the Brahmaputra Valley, and it was commonly understood that such migration was beneficial for the sparsely populated Valley and that no economic progress was possible otherwise.

The new peasantry filled the Valley’s western frontier as well as the char lands—the low-lying, flood-prone islands in the midstream of the flow of the Brahmaputra. Energetic and enterprising as migrants everywhere are, the impoverished Muslim arrivals led the way in rice-farming and multiple cropping; for the first time, jute became an important item of export. By the 1930s, the East Bengal peasants had turned their new homeland into the rice-bowl of the Indian Northeast.

In their land-abundant province, the Asamiyas were initially willing to make the most of this new and extremely cheap supply of labour. But as row after row of little thatched huts began to appear along the riverbank, the local politicians began to demand regulation and containment of the influx in order to, as one government report of 1938 put it, “save the forests and to reserve sufficient uncultivated land for the future generations of Asamiyas”. The response of the British was to enact the Line System, whereby native settlements were separated from the crowded migrant bustee. Small enclaves or ghettos of East Bengal Muslims emerged along the riverine districts and the chars of Assam, where no native wished to set up home. These lands, connected to the mainland only by the country-boat, hosted the speakers of various dialects of the East Bengal countryside.

In the first few decades of the nineteenth century the landless Muslim peasants from East Bengal were grateful for what land they could get in the Brahmaputra Valley, and there was no demand for a loosening of restriction imposed upon them by the Line System. But with an increase of human settlement in the char areas and the erosive activities of the river Brahmaputra, the condition of the settlers became increasingly precarious [this is not believable, the river could not have been more erosive than in the future, to the extent that it made a difference. What is more likely is that earlier they were desperate so they took what they got, but later they would like more protection from the floods than they could have got earlier, hei na?].
About this time, in the 1920s, a furious debate was on within and outside the Assam Legislature on the need to put some restriction on the hitherto unrestricted flow of East Bengal migrants – in order to preserve some land for the “future generation of the Asamiyas”. On the other hand, it was also unanimously accepted that the East Bengal peasants would be allowed to enjoy all the rights, including the right to hold land anywhere in Assam, if they were willing to accept the Assamiya language as their mother-tongue. Thus, towards the end of the 1930s, the Muslims of East Bengal origin in Assam were faced with two different kinds of pressures: one, the whims and fancies of a turbulent, unbridled river, and two, the pressure from the local Asamiyas to accept the Assamese language as their mother-tongue in return for land rights on the mainland. [Add here a sentence as to how and why they did not initially want to adopt the Asamiya language… this is required here for the later references that come up.]

The main bone of contention between the Congress Party and the Muslim League in Assam in the 1930s and 1940s was over the question of whether the Line System should stay or be abolished. There was an urgent cry among the migrant Muslims, under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhashani, for the loosening of the Line System as more and more chars and riparian villages were being washed away by the river every year [the only ecological explanation I can think is this – that as there is more habitation in the chars, there is less vegetation so they are less protected so there is more erosion. This seems to make sense. But I do not think you should make the point of increasing river erosion without properly explaining it.], leaving thousands homeless and pauperized. While it is true that the Muslim League Premier of Assam [of what? Where?] Sir Syed Saadullah did actively encourage the settlement of Muslim migrants from East Bengal in order to strengthen the Muslim League demand for inclusion of Assam in a proposed “six province” Pakistan, it was also true that he was responsible for a large number of ruthless eviction cases where internal displaceses had over-stepped the restrictions of the Line System. Letting loose elephants or setting fire to the shacks to drive out the illegal settlers were common eviction tactics adopted by the government.

It was only when the loss of the Muslim League cause in Assam became apparent that the migrant Muslims, under the direction of the Assam Muslim League leaders, including Maulana Bhashani himself, gradually began to consider adopting the Asamiya language officially, and to dissolve the Muslim League and join, en bloc, the Indian National Congress. It seemed, for a while, that the mixing up of the land issue with that of the language was now moving towards a solution after years of mistrust and uncertainty. This was in 1951.

But though the Asamiya middle class, including the Asom Sahitya Sabha, welcomed the migrant Muslims into the Asamiya nationality as “Na-Asamiyas” (The New Asamiyas), there was no move to address the twin problems of internal displacement from char areas and land acquisition in the Brahmaputra Valley. When the following year the river flushed out thousands of migrant Muslims from the river islands again, they had nowhere to go. [So what happened? Did this and following years lead to increasing resentment among the Muslims? Did this in turn put the Asamiyas on guard?]

The next significant date as far as the Na-Asamiyas of Assam are concerned, is 25 March 1971, when Bangladesh was established. This date became significant because as soon as the problem of IDPs began to be confused with that of illegal immigration from across the border. [Why was this confusion not there when BD was still East Pakistan?] While it was possible that some of the persons washed ashore were indeed illegal border crossers, [it could not be ruled out – too weak a formulation] the fact was that the majority of the IDPs were bonafide Indian citizens with family histories of a hundred years in the Assam chars and river banks. It was easy to confuse one for the other because both groups shared the same origin, ethnicity, language and culture. In postcolonial years, these IDPs thus became objects of suspicion by the receiving society. The state government, which was overwhelmingly dominated by high caste Asamiya Hindus, became increasingly lackadaisical in its attitude towards providing relief and rehabilitation, mainly because of social attitudes. Having to fend for themselves, this large displaced population naturally moved in to the neighboring towns and villages in search of jobs.

[Awneen, do not understand why the IDPs were not regarded as illegal migrants before 1971, as there already is a new international border with East Pakistan. So why the date 1971, and not say 1951…]

[An interesting point that can be made at the outset – on the one hand refugees (economic, or political) are being highlighted whereas the question of IDPs are not. In the case of the IDPs of Assam, they suffer double-jeopardy because they are being considered illegal migrants when in fact they are IDPs. So,
they already face the discrimination of being considered illegal infiltrators, and on top of that they are being neglected as IDPs, which is how it normally is. In addition, they have the image problem, as well as a social and economic problem. Other IDPs within India at least do not have an image problem.

There is an additional challenge to the Muslims of lower Assam which is not normally considered, and that is the sense of deprivation felt by the newly politicised tribes who have been the original inhabitants of the sparsely populated areas colonised by the East Bengal Muslims. A large number of Assam’s plains tribals, particularly the Tiwas or Lalung tribes in Morigaon district, have also been displaced following regular floods and river-bank erosion, along with the Muslims. Significantly, there exists a lot of tension between these two groups of internal displacees. On the one hand, the tribal demand that the Muslims evacuate the land that rightfully belonged to the former, and on the other, the determination of the Muslims not to vacate an inch of the land they had been farming upon for years, has led to a further complication of an already complicated scenario. In this way, the widening of the bed of the Brahmaputra, the twin processes of erosion and inundation and the resultant shrinkage of cultivable land continue to create new avenues of ethnic tension and conflict in the Assam plains. It was no coincidence that the infamous massacre of hundreds of Muslims in the locality of Nellie, during the height of the Assam Movement in 1983, was carried out by disaffected and dispossessed members of the Tiwa or Lalung tribe in Morigaon.

**Floods and internal displacement in chars**

The extreme deprivation of the char population becomes obvious when the floods begin to peak, around June-July. Along the riparian areas of Assam, thousands of the internally displaced from the chars and the river-bank areas are seen huddled together in temporary shelters on bunds, by the side of the highways or in the shacks and schoolhouses of the neighbouring mainland villages. These bustees become the source of cheap and ready labor for all of Assam’s towns and cities. According to published newspaper reports, in 1991, the going daily-wage rate for the internal displacees from the flood-affected areas of Morigaon and Lahorighat in Lower Assam was as little as Rs.5, whereas the average daily wages for the rest of the population at that time was at least Rs. 30. As the daily wage market becomes saturated due to continuous and unceasing out-migration from the riparian areas, and in the absence of any relief and rehabilitation from the government, many of the Muslim IDPs begin to move out further afield, including Upper Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Low wages, back-breaking labour, exploitation of women and children are harsh facts of life for these internal displacees.

Besides Morigaon and Lahorighat districts, Dhubri and Goalpara districts are two other areas of Lower Assam that experience very high rate of erosion and floods every year. In Dhubri, most of the IDPs find shelter on tops and sides of the hillocks along the river, such as Rakshashini Hills, Kosutola Hills, Shonamukhi Hills and Dudhnath Hills (see Jana, 2000; 10). Many from here spread out to the neighbouring district of Meghalaya, especially into towns like Shillong and Tura, the Garo Hills districts, and even as far as Agartala in Tripura. In these urban settings, they eke out precarious livelihoods as rickshaw-pullers, thela-pushers and as lowly paid daily wage labour. In 1989, out of a total of 7000 rickshaws in Nagaon town in middle Assam, no more than 2450 were licensed, the rest un-licensed and illegal (Ibid.;10). Most of the unlicensed rickshaw-pullers are IDPs from the neighbouring chars. Since most of them are from the ‘ghetto’ areas and cannot speak Asamiya well, they are often suspect of being fresh illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

In the chars, the more land a household owns, the more security it has in times of crisis and shortage. The landless, or those with very little in their name, have very little command over their lives and no security at all. Unpredictable climate, a shifting topography, limited technical resources and a rising population attribute greatly to the immense actual and symbolic value of land in the chars. As the Brahmaputra’s shifting course and high flood levels take their toll, an entire char or a part of it may easily disappear one year leaving the landowners with no property for a long time till such land re-emerges. Land is also lost or diminished due to fragmentation and inheritance, and salination may render the land sterile for a few years. In some cases, non-payment of revenue after land is eroded results in backdated dues demanded by the revenue department when it surfaces later. There are also instances of forced occupation of newly emerged land by the local landlords or Diwanis. And finally, of course, there are instances of distress sale, when pauperised peasants sell what little they still have for sheer survival. [It would be important to describe
what happens to people whose land disappears. Do they still get it back if it were to ‘re-emerge’ or do they get lost in the urban areas because who knows when the char lands would reemerge?

The powerlessness of the Muslim char refugees makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. For some, the towns and cities are a source of alternative income only in times of floods and therefore their migration is seasonal. Once the waters recede, the migrants slowly trace their way back to the chars and respective villages. But over the years due to a growing environmental degradation and the increasing wrath of the Brahmaputra, large numbers of permanent migrants are being attracted to the cities. These are the people whose lands are permanently claimed by the river and lost for all practical purposes. Most of these people never return to their chars.

**Kinship in chars**

Conflicts over newly emerged char lands and problems of relocation of the landless and river-bank erosion displaces are an intrinsic part of life in the chars. The role of the Diwani both in the organization and the mobilization of the lathials (making up private armies) for violent conflict over scarce resources is crucial.

Slow rates of accretion of viable agricultural land, sterility of land often due to excessive sand deposition and salinity, unnecessary delay of survey and settlement by the Land Revenue Department, and, above all, political inequalities arising out of the use of power and violence associated with the resettlement process, hinder the relocation of landless and displaced population. For the poor peasants who lose their land, the process is irreversible. Very few poor peasants have ever received their due share in the newly-emerged lands. On the contrary, the use of violence, dispossession, murder, and confiscation of crops and animals have almost become established patterns of char life. The selective use of violence by the local Diwanis who act as the patrons of the lathials are the ultimate arbiters of dispute over char land. When a patron succeeds in the violent fights resettlement takes place usually with this support groups, kin or dependents and the patron remains the virtual lord of the entire char. Relocations are sometimes followed by triangular fights between the local Diwanis who want to grab land, people who held the land prior to erosion and the new settlers. [Are the Diwanis also Char Muslims?]

Kinship, whether actual or fictive, remains one of the crucial factors of land allocation of migration for only through kinship links do the men gain access to the land. Therefore, to understand life in the char, it is important to understand the categories of attiyo (kin) is crucial. It is the key to local politics, and even economic links between families/households are made on the basis of kinship.

The following can be taken as the broad pattern of land relocation in chars:

- There is competition for occupation of newly emerged char land between both the original owners and new settlers.
- However, land distribution and allocation is done by the Diwani who occupies it through sheer muscle-power.
- Most Diwanis no longer live on the chars but have moved to settled villages. But char lands serve as valuable resources for them and are their investments.
- The char land is re-allocated by them to their kin and/or friends or, that kinship plays an important role in land re-allocation.
- The Diwanis who have moved out of the char themselves, simultaneously control land in more than one area.
- Land possession rights might be given to the highest bidder from another region; agricultural labourers might migrate to new areas; a steady out-migration of the landless to nearby towns, both seasonal and permanent – these are intrinsic features of char life and its population. For the most part it is a mobile population and the census is never properly conducted in these areas.
- The low profile of the police in maintaining law and order and the corrupt practices of the officers of the Revenue Department.
The use of violence by the local Diwanis to grab land.

During floods, a number of people lose their lives to fury of the ferocious waters while some others succumb to enteric fever. Children often die of water-borne diseases at the relief camps, as this researcher observed in camps organized by the district authorities at Mairabari and Nagaon. Some people, we were informed by a volunteer at one camp, died from eating poisonous objects out of sheer hunger. Human beings die or are displaced; animals starve or are washed away; crops and homes are destroyed; whole square miles of land are washed away. Such is the dimension of the annual floods of the Brahmaputra in the chars of Assam.

The Vote Bank

One crucial reason why a problem of such overwhelming human dimensions – the displacement of the char population – has not been adequately addressed is its overlapping with the with the illegal immigration issue, which takes sympathy and governmental interest away from the Muslim peasantry of Lower Assam. But how long can such a scenario continue? What happens to the thousands of families that are uprooted every year and are thereafter scattered all over the Northeast, some even finding their ways to the slums of Delhi and Rajasthan, far to the west? And as more and more sarong clad men fill the gaps in the town economies, the fears of the host society within Assam receive a fillip.

In Assam, none of the political parties have a reasonable or realistic approach to the problem of illegal immigration. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has made inroads into Assam in the recent years, is in favour of repealing the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983, supposedly to facilitate detection and deportation of all "illegal" Bangla migrants. This stance is not inconsistent with the BJP’s right-wing ideology, and appeals to its constituency of mostly upper-caste Hindus of Assam. But in actual terms, there has been absolutely no movement in any direction after its phenomenal victory in the last Parliamentary elections in the Brahmaputra Valley. [Explain what IMDT act says and its significance, as you refer to it again and again.]

The ruling Congress (I), which has been assiduously courting the minorities, naturally opposes the repeal of the IMDT Act as it evokes fears among the minorities in Assam that it would make them vulnerable to harassment and renewed witch-hunts [why is Congress approach not ‘realistic’?] The Asom Gana Parishad, which emerged out of the Assam Agitation as a party aspiring to fulfill 'genuine' Asamiya ethnic aspirations and which twice made it to power with overwhelming mandates, finds itself in the most difficult position vis-a-vis this issue. After having maintained an uncomfortable silence on the matter of the repeal of the IMDT Act for some years (as it cannot ideologically oppose it, while vocal support on the other hand can alienate the minorities), it has recently articulated its position somewhat confusingly: opposing the IMDT Act does not mean opposing minorities.

Most other parties, such as the United Minorities Front of Assam, as also the Left, are generally opposed to the repeal of the controversial act. Not surprisingly, a section of the former All Assam Students' Union (AASU) leadership has been, in the past, most vociferous in its effort to rake up the issue again in election time. AASU is making a bid to enter the electoral fray, and there is an attempt to pressure the AGP to accommodate it; failing which, it still can work out an equation with the BJP, with which it has ideological affinity.

It is certainly not an easy thing in any democracy to propose changes that are at variance with the sentiments of a sizeable constituency. Thus, the political parties in Assam are stuck between the horns of a dilemma: to propose stringent measures to check illegal immigration might make a party unpopular among its Muslim constituency (28 percent of Assam’s population and a majority in some Assam districts). To ignore the demands of the indigenous people, tribals and Asamiya, on the other hand, may also have a similar repercussion, while it is commonly believed that while Muslims in India vote en bloc, the non-Muslims have individual preferences. But maintaining status quo on the issue of illegal immigration has had critical impact on society and ethnic relations in Assam, the least of which is the neglect of the issue of internal displacement in Assam plains. As Baruah perceptively points out: "If Assam’s communities worry
about being minorities in their own lands, a persistent cloud of suspicion about the legal status of ‘foreigners’ have not helped Assam’s ‘immigrant’ communities either” (Baruah, 1999; 203).

What happens then?

Movement of populations have taken place for as long as one cares to remember from the pages of history or even myths and fables. The difference in present times is that, firstly, there is more population and so more proclivity to out-migrate as the land cannot sustain as well as the possibility of inundation of new lands by a larger influx than in earlier times; secondly, there are more rigid boundaries, some of them re-drawn, so that it is now possible to call some more people ‘outsiders’ even if one were to only speak of inter-state and not necessarily international boundaries. During colonial times, the over-arching power of the Centre made possible mass migration of ethnically different peoples (tea plantations, lumber, rubber, tin mining, etc.) by giving it a cover of power, without which, the territories ingesting the migrants would possibly have blocked them. In the absence of such colonial power, a symbiotic relationship may well have evolved between the migrant and indigenous peoples. In the meantime, as the local people became more educated in the post-colonial and the politics of numbers began to matter, the situation was ripe for a backlash. This kind of backlash following the departure of the colonials is not unique to Assam or India’s Northeast, but also in Southeast Asia, Africa and many parts of the developing world.

One possible way out of the situation would be for the powerful Centre to continue to remain protectors of the IDPs, but this is not a viable or secure solution given the vissicitudes of Centre-state politics. So, a complex period lies ahead, when more autonomy will be granted to smaller units of the Indian Union. This autonomy can lead to an unravelling of the security situation for the weaker communities – including the Muslim *char* population in the case of Assam. To prevent mass misery and violence, the emerging autonomy of the various part of the Indian Union must come with guarantees extracted from the new elite so far as IDPs and other vulnerable minorities are concerned. This requires a certain amount of intellectual evolution in each of the autonomous areas and an understanding that is well publicized and agreed upon.

In the case of Assam, an unambiguous policy approach towards the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh has to be made if one were to address impartially the issue of IDPs. A clear-cut legal mechanism acceptable to all communities for detecting illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has to be created in order to separate the Muslims of East Bengal origin who are Indian citizens from the more recent arrivals who are not. The existing piece of legislation for detection of illegal immigrants, The Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983 (amended in 1985), as the past 17 years have amply demonstrated, is not equipped to deal with this complex process of detection. So, the political parties of the state, particularly the ruling Congress (I), have to move beyond mere considerations of the ballot-box and address the issue directly. The legal status, or non-status, of the internal displaces makes them totally dependent on the local governments for redress unlike the refugees who are able to draw upon international aid and the debate re-focuses itself around the responsibility of the national governments towards the internally displaced persons: what happens to those IDPs who do not have the privilege to turn themselves into refugees? One is reminded here of the IDPs in Kosovo, some of whom received international aid because they were able to cross over national borders. Those that could not, had to live for days eating leaves from the surrounding forests! Such is the difference in the legal status of IDPs and refugees!

That such a critical issue has drawn almost no policy attention, at the Centre or State level after 1985 in Assam, is indicative of a gross lack of political will towards its resolution as it continues to be an effective election slogan in many parts of the state. Its non-resolution has, over the past twenty-odd years, given rise to fresh political tension in the state: tension over internal displacement in Assam’s plains, the creation of the insurgent group United Liberation Front of Assam**, the Bodo insurgency, tribals versus Muslim displaces and even conflict induced internal displacement of marginalized communities especially in the Bodo dominated areas of lower Assam. In this way, the illegal immigrants issue has had a domino effect on local politics in Assam.

For a country like India, the main concern of policy makers should be IDPs and not refugees as it is such a large country that it is the IDPs who represent a larger volume of mass misery than those who are termed...
‘refugees’. Facts on the ground prove it, from Kashmiri Pundits to the ‘development refugees’ all over, to
the char displaced of Lower Assam. There are so many critical issues that remain to be sorted out, but there
is not yet a serious body of opinion in India looking at IDPs, nor are there institutions in place to look into
the problem. Since international social organizations are not really welcome in India, this might be the case
of an out-of-government organization to look into the critical problems of IDPs in India, given that this is
one of the major problems of the population groups in the modern era of India after 1947. Such an
institution certainly would not be the beloved of either the Centre or the state governments in question, but
it would be necessary for the sake of the deprived communities in question.

The End

Notes and References:

1 For this paper, internally displaced people are, “….persons or groups of persons who have been forced or
obliged to flee or leave their homes or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to
avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural
disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border”, Handbook for Applying
the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, The Brookings Institution Project on Internal
Displacement, (Washington DC, 1999).

2 Lama points out that there are four categories of internal displacement in India: Those displaced due to
a/Political causes, including secessionist movements
b/ Identity-based autonomy movements
c/ Localised violence
d/ Environmental and development-induced displacement. See Mahendra P. Lama, August 2000, “Internal
Displacement in India: Causes, Protection and Dilemmas”, in Forced Migration Review of the University
of Oxford/Norwegian Refugee Council, No. 8 [Internet].

3 “North-east India has been facing severe internal displacement since it entered into the postcolonial phase
over the past five decades….Besides conflict, environmental factors like the Great Earthquake of 1950,
perennial flood and river-bank erosions too, have caused displacement of tens of thousands of people in
Assam’s plains every year…..” Monirul Hussain, “State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement

4 Few academic publications exist on such displacement. Some information may be had from Hussain,
2000.

5 See Anindita Dasgupta, “Political Mythmaking in Postcolonial Assam” in Himal South Asian,
(Kathmandu, August 2000), Amalendu Guha, Asom Nomore, Amiyu Nomoru (Guuwahati, 1997).

6 For an ethnographic study of migrant Muslim communities in middle Assam chars, see Anindita
Dasgupta, Emergence of a Community : Muslims of East Bengal Origin in Assam in the Colonial and

7 This point has been summarily raised by Guha, 1999 and B.G.Verghese, “India Resurgent:

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9 For a detailed discussion, see Monirul Hussain, The Assam Movement : Class, Identity, Ideology,
Manak Publications, (Delhi, 1993), Amalendu Guha, “ Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist : Assam’s Anti-
Foreigner Movement, 1979-80, Economic and Political Weekly, (India, October Special Issue, 1980),

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Abdul Hamid Khan, better known as Maulana Bhashani, was born in a poor family of East Bengal. He was involved in the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements and finally emerged as a leader of the Muslim peasants of East Bengal where he organized them to fight the zamindars. Soon he became influential among the Bengali Muslim immigrants in Assam and was elected a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937. Bhashani led the immigrant Muslims in a movement against the Line System in Assam and demanded that belts and blocks reserved for the tribals be opened up for occupation. As the president of the provincial Muslim League, Bhashani had, with support from the Muslim League leaders of Bengal, planned a series of marches in Lower Assam in February 1947 against the Line System but the move fizzled out when the possibility of Assam being included in East Pakistan receded. After partition, Bhashani became an important leader in East Pakistan and later on played an important role in the creation of Bangladesh.

13 Sir Sayed Mohammed Saadullah headed five different ministries in Assam during the period April 1937 to February 1946. An Asamiya Muslim, Saadullah is seen as being largely responsible for the large scale entry and settlement of Muslim immigrants from East Bengal. In just one year, 1939-40, the Saadullah government settled Muslim immigrants on one lakh bighas of land in the Brahmaputra Valley. Sir Saadullah joined the Muslim League in 1937 and supported the Grouping Scheme under the Cabinet Mission Plan.

14

15 The government Revenue Department informed this researcher that in the period 1964 to 1988, in the Bhuragaon circle of Nagaon district alone, 42 villages have fallen victim to the forces of erosion. In a press release the department stated that, of these, in 21 villages a total of 20,120 bighas 1 katha and 10 lessas of land have been washed away by the mighty Brahmaputra. The government was yet to ascertain the level and area of destruction in the other 21 villages. Again, in the Lahorighat and Mairabari mauzas of the Lahorighat revenue circle, Nagaon, the extent of loss of land has been estimated at 12,041 bighas, 3 kathas, 15 lessas and 14.994 bighas 1 lessa respectively in the last 10 years (Dasgupta, 2001; 267).

16 *Char* landlordism or the *Diwani* system is a typical feature of East Bengal rural social organization, it has been carried over by the migrants as have so many other traditions and systems. The *Diwani* in the *char* areas of Assam is somewhat analogous to the *Jotedar* of East Bengal. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 among others, created several layers of landlords, big and small, in the countryside of Bengal. The establishment of private property rights in land by the Act of 1793 and the forced commercialisation of agriculture benefited the *jotedars* or the rich planters and the peasant cultivators was further consolidated by the enactment of the Rent Act of 1859 and the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. Most of these rent-appropriators, the *jotedars*, emerged as power brokers in the rural power structure. They became not only the instruments for increasing revenue but also facilitated the expansion of cash crop cultivation -- both of which were essential to maintaining the continuous flow of trade between Bengal and Britain. Not much
is known about how this landlordism was carried over to Assam. The only acknowledgment of the existence of landlordism among the migrant Muslims in Assam is found in Hussain's writings.

The immigrants were financed by their own headmen (Matabbar) as well as by Marwari and Assamese (Barpetia) money lenders. They (the migrant Muslims) are highly exploited by the landlord aristocracy belonging to their own community known as matabbar (literally: Head), in collaboration with the state police and bureaucracy. The matabbars are socially orthodox, politically conservative, and obviously they have the vested interests in keeping the entire community backward in order to ensure their own economic and political dominance in the existing exploitative system.

The Report of the Line System Committee, 1938 described the *matbar* in the following words:

> There are several tenure holders particularly in the immigrant areas who own vast fields of land, far in excess of their actual requirement. They have set up small zamindaris and style themselves as Matabbars and Jotedars almost on the same lines of Bengal System.

There are two kinds of landlords among the migrant Muslims in Assam—*Matabar* and *Diwani*. The difference between the two is that while the former are to be found in the settled villages of the migrants, the latter belong to the *chars*. The difference between the two forms of landlordism was explained to us by Kalam Ali, 41 and Rustom Mukhtear, 90—the latter himself a *matbar*.

>'No, no, I am not a Diwani,' laughed the grey-haired Mukhtear who claimed to have an extended family of a thousand persons. 'They have made me a matabbar (laughs). We are like headmen. We solve fights and quarrels. My people respect me and listen to me. They accept my decisions. No, I do not have land in the char. I am not interested to have land there. Diwanis are quarrelsome'.

>'Diwanis are dangerous and very powerful people,' said Kalam Ali, 'They are not like our Matbars. Mukhtear here, all Hindus and Muslims of the village respect him. We are afraid of Diwanis. They are masters of the char and have armies. No one can fight with them.......'

Mukhtear told us that the main job of the *matbar* is to solve land disputes.

He illustrated his point with an example.

>'Let us assume that a man has lost land this year. So he moves to Nagaon to pull rickshaws for some time or work as labourer in construction sites. Next year he hears that his land has emerged. He returns to his char only to find that the Diwani, say Makan Morol, has occupied it by force. He pleads with Morol but Morol says no. Then sometimes the poor man comes to me and asks for help. I speak to Morol, Tell him this man is poor, give him back his land. Morol cannot refuse. So he returns the land,' laughed the old man, obviously satisfied with his position in society. 'Sometimes it happens in the villages also. One powerful man takes over the land of another. Again there are disputes between two very powerful men with eyes on the same piece of land. Then I settle the matter by seeing who is right'.

See for details Dasgupta, 2001; 281-282.

17 All this was summarized by two separate groups of 40 males each in Kochmora *char* in Nagaon district. Later it was also verified by encounters in several *chars* in Lower Assam. One of them, Tazimuddin, was an agricultural labourer who had lost his land to the river abut ten years back. Two years back the land had emerged but the local *Diwani* had blocked his way to it. Tazimuddin has two wives and six children. For the last ten years he has been working as an agricultural labourer in someone else's land.

>'Lathi jaar, maati taar, This is the law of our land. I shall never get my land back', he said.
We spoke to a new settler on Kochmara char land. Khalek Miya, 48 with his wife Zalaika Bibi and their seven children have been living in Kochmara since the last two years. Originally he was from village Baralimari, Nagaon which was about twenty miles from this char.

We asked: Why did you come to this char?

Ans: Life was hard there (in Baralimari).

Q: How so?
A: I did not have land ...house..... in our desh.

Q: In that case, how did you survive until two years back?
A: (Speaking in an embarrassed tone) My father had a little (land).... we are six brothers.... land divided.... I got one bigha and 13 lessas only..... family cannot survive... So I came to this char.

Q: Why did you come to a char?
A: Land was available here.

Q: Did you come alone or in a group?
A: Some came early, some later.....according to convenience.

Q: How did you get land here?
A: We have taken it together....all of us ..... there is a person..........he gave us land.

Q: Who is he?
This question was repeated several times to which Khalek Miya responded with a vague smile. We decided to reframe the question.

Q: Is he a Diwani?
A: yes.

Q: Why did you go to a Diwani and not to anybody else?
A: They are the people who divide and distribute char land.

Q: To acquire land on the char you have to speak with them? Is there no other way?
A: (Does not speak for a while).....No other way....I have seven children, one after the other.. From these chars people came (to my village).....that rice and jute grow well...people have come to know. In char there is good crop. So we too came slowly....last Bhadra.

Q: Please continue.
A: If one person is comfortable, he pulls another. May be relations and friends.

Q: How is this information passed?
A: What shall I say.....I am hungry. In my hunger I go to your place. You are my relative. I tell that I am hungry... I will do labour job...give me just food. For sake of my stomach. My children have to live. He, my relative says why beg? Go to this char, he says, my friends are there. There is land. So I know of this char.

Q: Have you faced any problems here? Any violence?
A: Sometimes people come and say this is my land you are sitting on. But this is mine now I have paid the Diwani. Some fights are there sometimes but Diwanis are very strong. No one can fight them for long.

Q: How many Diwanis are there in this char?
A: Five or six.

We spoke to many others. Their testimonies tallied. See for details, Dasgupta, 2001, pp.275-285.
That kinship also serves as an important criteria of allocation of char land was established by our fieldwork in middle Assam chars.

**Case : A**

Hashim Ali, 25. Married with two children aged 2 and 4 respectively. Hashim had tried to get a share of land in the newly emerged char. ‘But I was refused’, he said. ‘They said you are not our attiyo. We have many attiyo here asking for land. So how can we give you any?’ Hashim has no land and works as an agricultural labourer in Kochmara.

**Case : B**

Imroz, 57. Two wives and ten children. All children married. Possesses four bighas of land on Kochmara. ‘My father was related to the father of the Diwani’s wife. I went to her and said one attiyo must help another. She spoke to her husband and he sold me some land’. Imroz grows vegetables and rice on his fields.

**Case : C**

Shogun Sarkar, 30. Widower with no children. Landless agricultural labourer. ‘I will go away very soon to the town and pull rickshaw’, he told us. ‘I have friends and brothers there. Here I have no one, no land. No one can give me land here. I have no attiyo who is a big man in this char. I will go to Nagaon in a few months’.

See Ibid.; 2001, for details of kinship and land allocation in chars.

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For detailed discussion on stand of political parties in Assam, see Dasgupta, 2000.

On February 1983, over 1200 persons, mostly women and children were butchered to death at Nellie, 70 Km east of Guwahati, the present capital of Assam. An eminent Asamiya journalist, Homen Bargoain, estimated the death toll at 3,000. All the victims were Muslims of East Bengal origin. “Undoubtedly, the Nellie massacre is one of the single largest and severest pogroms that the second world war history has witnessed”, writes sociologist Monirul Hussain, (2000).