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THE MIGRATION, ECONOMIC CHANGES AND QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN KARBI ANGLONG AND NORTH CACHAR HILLS (1970-2000)

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Abstract:- The paper is an attempt to study the North India migration, role of migrants in the economy, question identity transformation in the Hills districts of Assam. It were the North Indian migrants who brought the Commercialization of agricultural production in these two districts and brought changes and some time transformed the economic life of both indigenous and the migrants and migrants became economically dominant. The study makes an attempt to assess the process of socio-cultural and political exclusion of the migrant population and how they began to be excluded from the political scenario.

Keywords: Migration, Economic changes and Question of Identity .

INTRODUCTION:

Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills:

The Present hills districts of Assam i.e. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills came into existence as United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District on the 17th November 1951. The United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was created after carving out certain districts of present Assam and Meghalaya. The United district was created after carving out present Golaghat, Nagaon and Cachar of Assam and United Khasi and Jaintia Hill district of present Meghalaya. The United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district later separated into two under the name of "Mikir Hills District" and "North Cachar Hills District" in the year 1970. The Mikir Hill district was renamed as "Karbi Anglong District" in the yeas of 1976. They also come under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution which enjoys the autonomy in various departments as well as governance.

Both these districts of Central Assam constituted 19.38 per cent of total geographical area of Assam and 3.12 per cent of total population of Assam in 1971. The total area of the hills district of Assam in the same year was 15,222 sq. km of total 78,545 area of Assam. The density of population in the hills districts was 30 persons per sq. km as against 224 per sq.km of the plain regions of Assam in the year 1971. The population of Karbi Anglong was 662723 in 1991 which rose to 812320 in 2001 and density of population in 2001 rose to 78 people per Sq. Km as against North Cachar Hills's 150801 people in 1991, which rose to 186189 in 2001 with density of population 38 people per Sq. Km in 2001 .

Migration in the Hill Districts:

The Hill districts of Assam large scale migration during the second half of the 20th century.

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The growing population due to heavy migration put pressure on the land and this in a way brought the issue of socio-economic sustainability. The growing population of migrants in the districts also brought the issue of Socio-cultural and the political identity. Migration had put pressure on the demography of the districts which posed various question regarding society, economy and the polity. Thus the enquiry of the migration in the district would show why and how or whether migrants were putting pressures on the resources of the districts.

It was during early 20th century Nepali migrants began to migrate to hills areas of Assam and occupied the fertile hills slopes of the region. The number of Nepali speakers in Karbi Anglong was 1.0 lakh in 1951 which increased to 3.59 lakh in 1971 . The migration of Hindus from the Bangladesh was on the peak during the communal riots of 1950s. It was due to high migration of Hindus across the border led to a high increase in number of Hindus in Both the hills districts. In Karbi Anglong, Hindu population increased from 67.40 per cent (of total population of district) in 1951 to 81.64 per cent in 1961 and in North Cachar Hills it increase to from 76.33 per cent in 1951 to 79.50 per cent in 1961.

It were the North Indian migrants (migrants from Bihar and U.P) began to occupy the hills districts of Assam i.e. Karbi Anglong (Earlier known as Mikir Hills districts) and North Cachar Hills, roughly from the 1950's which continued at a moderate rate till 1971. As both the districts were very low density, it led to a permanent migration to the area. The rate of migrant settlement remains virtually very high in the Karbi Anglong district as compare to N.C.Hills. Though the number of north Indian migrants to the area was even highest than (both from West Bengal and Bangladesh) who settled in the border areas of the districts.

According to 1971 Census, the percentage of Hindi Speakers in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills was 7.59 and 4.41 as against the 5.42 per cent of all Assam average. The main reason for the low percentage of the Hindi speakers in North Cachar Hills as compare to Karbi Anglong was due to poor connectivity which became a hindrance in the economic activity. But at the same time broader economic opportunities and the direct railway links attracted migrants from North India. The trend of migration continued to rise in the Hills districts of Assam and in 1991, out of every 10000 of population in Karbi Anglong, the number of Hindi speakers was 954 which mean 9.54 per cent of total population. In North Cachar Hills this rose 5.52 per cent of total population. These numbers went ahead of 4.62 per cent of all Assam average. In 2001, number of Hindi Speakers in Karbi Anglong went up to 10.4% of total population and at the same time it decreased to 4.6 in North Cachar Hills due to coming of militant organisations from the mid 1990s.

It was the migrants who developed contact with the indigenous people and influenced their socio-cultural and economic aspect of life. Coming of North Indian in the hills district led to the process of assimilation and transformation in the identity of the migrant people but it were the North Indian migrants who saw more violence against them. It was dominant indigenous people who developed an exclusive 'Social and Political' identity which became the matter of emancipation for them and created violence against migrants. Growing population in the Hill districts developed the growing contradictions among the various communities in the hill districts.

Field of North Indian Migrants in Hills Districts:

The field of migrant settlement in Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hill was different from other part of Assam as the migrants in other parts of Assam migrated basically as labourers i.e. tea plantation labour, wage laborers, labor in the brick kilns, rickshaw pullers, coal field workers, construction work and also as the help in the trade and the commerce etc. Apart from the menial workers migration large number of technical and non-technical workers also migrated basically to the municipal regions, towns and in the city of Guwahati. They also aided as the cause for the economic development of the region.

North Indians also migrated as the professionals such as school teachers but the number of the North Indians in these fields in other parts of the state was negligible. In hill districts of Assam north Indian migrants migrated neither as the wage laborers nor as menial workers and not even as the agricultural laborers but as the direct cultivator of the virgin land and at the same time became the holder/owner of the cultivated land. In the Brahmaputra valley the migrants were basically

temporary, migratory or semi-settled but migration to the hill districts was more permanent. In Karbi Anglong, the migrants were permanent due to the nature of economic opportunity, though in North Cachar hills where the migration from north India is a much recent phenomenon, is temporary and the semi-permanent. As the migration in the North Cachar hills from north India directly started in 1990s was temporary thus the migrants cannot be enumerated on the regular basis. Most of the migrants, who migrated in North Cachar Hills before 1990s, migrated to Karbi Anglong first and after spending few years in Karbi Anglong made a kind of temporary settlement in North Cachar Hills for the cultivation of various crops such as sugarcane, mustard and various kinds of pulses.

The Existing Mode of Cultivation in the Area:

The agricultural economy of the hills districts of Assam remained basically a subsistence economy. Their system of shifting cultivation was Jhuming i.e. cutting and burning of a piece of land. Jhuming still remains a major mode of agricultural production in the remote areas of the Hill districts. In this mode of cultivation same piece of land cannot be used for the cultivation in consecutive years. There was subsistence based production of maize, rice, fruits such as pineapple, pears, orange and other citrus fruits in the shifting cultivation. In the hill areas, other crops like wheat and maize was grown along with oilseeds, fibre crops, banana, potato and turmeric.

The important crops produced in shifting cultivation are maize, seasamum, cotton, tapioca, ginger, turmeric, cucurbits etc. In the low lying areas other types of wet cultivation are carried out viz paddy, wheat, oil seed, potato and sugarcane on small basis along with varieties of horticultural crops. Paddy is grown both in shifting and in the wet cultivation. Maize as food grain remains prominent among the hills tribes of Present Assam till 1980s. For tribes both in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, apart from rice, maize remained a prominent Crop. In 1984-85, in hill districts total land used for the maize cultivation was 12960 hectares which was 7.87 per cent of the total land cultivated; it was also around 66.49 per cent of the total area cultivated in all Assam. Hills district produce around 8449.92 tonnes of maize at a yield of 652 kg/hectare and whole Assam produced only 11929 tonnes at an average of 612 kg/hectare.

But why did maize remain such an important crop for the tribes in the region? It is mainly because the production of maize was very high as compare to the other food grains and it can easily be cultivated in the existing environmental condition of the area. The varieties and uses of maize were different from tribe to tribe. It is used for human food, particularly when immature i.e. green corn, wine-making, and for pig-feeding, for chicken and ducks (poultry birds). It was eaten fresh, boiled or roasted, and was consumed by the majority of population. Most is eaten when soft, but a proportion is stored for the winter, when its main use, except in seasons of rice shortage, is for wine. Though rice was a prominent grain among the Dimasa and other tribes of present North Cachar hills district, maize remained prominent among the Karbi tribes of Present Karbi Anglong district till the coming of migrants from the North Indian Migrants and till their consolidation in the area i.e. 1980s.

Migrants, Individual ownership and commercialization:

The permanent agriculture and settled cultivation was introduced by the migrants on the large scale, who also started the process of individual ownership in the land. The gradual replacement of the communal ownership by the individual ownership of land took place with the people's acceptance of permanent cultivation. The acceptance of permanent agriculture is linked to migration which led to the growth in population and permanent settlement in the region. In Karbi Anglong and N. C. Hills, the density of population in 1956 was 3.73 persons per sq.km with the total population of 75,000. In 1972, the density of population in Karbi Anglong reached to 16.79 per sq.km with total population of 173,493 and N. C. Hills at 10.82 per sq.km with total population of 52,908. The migrants/immigrants in the hills districts were basically Nepalese and Bangladeshis (immigrants) and Bihari migrants. Due to the permanent settlement and the agricultural practices individual right in the land and the concentration of the land in few lands increased drastically.

The North Indian migrants became prominent in the economy of the hills districts because the Nepali immigrants were the pastoral community and produced the food grains only of the subsistence. The North Indian migrants came in the district as the direct cultivators or the tiller of the

land though a very small number migrated as the Agricultural laborer and Bangladeshi immigrants came in the hills district as the direct assistance to the migrant cultivators. The Bihari and Bangladeshi, migrants/immigrants were highly skilled settled cultivators in the district though the Bangladeshis worked only as the skilled labor in the cultivation. The Bangladeshi immigrants (basically Muslims) remained the major labor force in the hills district only because the 'question of legality' raised the question for them which was not the case with the Nepali immigrants due to the racial similarity they easily assimilated in the tribal culture.

The outsiders played important role in the spread of wet cultivation which added to settled agriculture and the individual ownership in the land. . The concentration of land in the few hands brought the incentive for the production for the market. Due to the individual ownership of the land certain practices of leasing the land to the north Indian migrants became prominent as good amount of wealth was generated from leasing by tribal people. The migrants, whose primary motive was to generate more profit from the land rather than to produce only for subsistence, utilized these extra lands for the market based production. The individual ownership of the land explored the complex marketing potential of products produce by the tribal and non-tribal in the hills of Assam. The sugarcane production altered the pattern of livelihood both for the tribal and the non-tribal population of Hills districts. With the coming of the North Indian migrants, the commercialization of the subsistence based products started.

With the coming of North Indian migrants, practices such as Paikas, Sukti Bandhok, and Khoi Bandhok which were temporary land transfer in the Hills districts became more widespread and frequent. Certain practices of temporary leasing of land were declared illegal in the hills districts of Assam which differed from one another and continued to be practices in different parts of two districts. For example, the Paikas system was declared illegal by the Mikir Hills district's Land transfer act 1959 but continued to be practice in some area, such as Rongkhang block of west Karbi Anglong till 1980's where north Indians were the largest in number.

Though the land transfer from tribal to non-tribal was prohibited under the Land transfer act of 1959 and the Land reform act 1979 (both in case of Karbi Anglong) as a safeguard against encroachments by the outsiders but in practice it failed to provide any safeguard. But this did not provided safeguard to tribal land rights as by 1980s the 'encroachment' and 'illegal' occupation of large tract of land under 'Paika System' or 'System of Land Mortgage' was in practice despite the fact it was declared illegal by the district council as it provided economic benefits both to migrants and tribals. But this kind of land reforms or act did not pass in North Cachar hills as the autonomous district council was responsible for the allotment of land based on the preference. These systems of leasing and alienation of land through various systems of temporary land transfer led to development of agriculture in the Hill districts of Assam at the same time started politicization of Hill district in 1990s. This can also be seen as a period of different politics in the hills districts.

Legality and the Question of Migrant's Identity:

As the pressure of the migrants increased in the hills districts, certain legal actions were taken by the autonomous council government to curb their influence. The Land Reform act of 1979 was one of them, which was used as a measure to reduce or minimize the influence of migrant culture. This act was formulated through the influence of the middle class and tribal elites. The legal sanction against the migrants was taken mainly to protect the interest of the dominant class of tribes. This act was implemented only in Karbi Anglong and not in the North Cachar Hills because the domination and influence of the Bihari migrants was very less in North Cachar Hills as compare to Karbi Anglong. As in 1971, population of Hindi speakers in N. C. Hills was only around 4.41% of total population and during the same period it was 7.59% in Karbi Anglong which further increased to 10.4% in Karbi Anglong and remained more or less same around 4.6% in North Cachar Hills in 2001 . Due to socio-cultural and the economic interaction among the tribals and the Bihari migrants these act failed to restrict the mobility and the migration of North Indians in Karbi Anglong.

The Assam Accord of 1985 was passes as a mean to counter the encroachment of government tribal land in Assam which says it would be ensured that relevance law for the protection against the encroachment of government land in tribal belts and blocks will strictly be enforced and

unauthorized encroacher evicted as laid down under such law. This law was formulated basically due to the influence of the agitation leadership which took different shape in the Hill districts. As the period till 1986 was the period of congress's political domination in the Hill districts despite the fact it lost the 1985 assembly election of Assam, it protected its vote bank through the protection of migrants in the Hill districts which formed the support base for the Congress party in the districts.

It was ASDC (Autonomous State Demanding Committee) formed soon after the conclusion of Assam Movement began to mobilized the Karbi, Dimasas, Hmar and other tribes on the issue of autonomy and the anti-migration and successfully defeated congress government. After coming to power in the autonomous councils, it further strengthened the anti-North Indian propaganda. This started the process of social-political exclusion for migrants. But the anti-migrant sentiment developed more in the minds of tribal people who had minimum contact with the migrants and did not develop in the areas where interaction between the communities was stronger. It worked more like rumor created by the educated classes for their own benefits.

The autonomous council government has got various new autonomous powers through Memorandum of Understanding between the ASDC and Government of Assam (Assam Gono Parishad) signed in 1995. The signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on April 1, 1995 between the Assam Government and the leaders of the ASDC which gave autonomous councils autonomy in 23 departments. This MoU was possible only because both ASDC and AGP (Assam Gono Parishad) came to power on the issues of migration and immigration respectively and also on anti-Congress. It used its political autonomy to restrict the political influence of the Hindi speakers. This politics of socio-political exclusion created distinct identity of migrants. By the end of the 20th century the political condition of North Indian Migrants became miserable as they were targeted by the militant organizations of the district such as UPDS. In many instances large numbers of migrants were killed by militant organizations.

CONCLUSION:

Despite the fact the North India migrants played an important role in all around development of the Autonomous region, it was the migrants who faced the identity crisis in the Hill districts. The North Indian migrants started various new practices of agriculture and provided the councils with the largest share of Revenue but these are the social groups who are politically most excluded informally. The North Indian migrants provided the government as well as the indigenous people with incentives for the economic development of the district. It was the cultivation of Sugarcane which provided the indigenous with the prosperous economic life. But they were systematically targeted by the political as well as militant organization.

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