

C/77-13

#2146



**SEEKING ETHNIC EQUALITY:  
A CASE STUDY OF MIGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT  
POLICIES IN AN INDIAN STATE**

Myron Weiner

**MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT STUDY GROUP**

Center for International Studies  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Seeking Ethnic Equality:  
A Case Study of Migration and Employment  
Policies in an Indian State

Myron Weiner

Department of Political Science  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Migration and Development Study Group

Center for International Studies  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

September 1977



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
List of Tables	iii
1. THE POLITICAL SETTING	3
2. POLICIES	9
(1) EDUCATION POLICIES	11
(2) EMPLOYMENT POLICIES	14
(3) MIGRATION POLICIES	20
3. POLICY EFFECTS	21
(1) DIRECT, INTENDED AND VISIBLE EFFECTS	21
(2) INDIRECT, UNINTENDED AND INVISIBLE EFFECTS	44
4. CONCLUSION	48
Appendix 1: FIRMS THAT ARE LESS THAN ONE-THIRD ASSAMESE	51
Appendix 2: PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYERS OF ASSAMESE	57



LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Employees in Twenty-Eight Firms: Sector of Activity By Mother Tongue	26
2	Occupational Classification of Employees By Place of Birth	29
3	Employees in Eight Firms: Mother Tongue of <u>Non-Migrants</u> By Occupational Classification	30
4(a)	Employees in Public Sector Firms By Occupational Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)	32
4(b)	Employees in Private Sector Firms by Occupational Classification and Place of Birth	33
5	Employees By Occupational Classification, Migrant Status, and Founding Date of Firm	35
6(a)	Occupational Classification of Recent Employees By Place of Birth	37
6(b)	Occupational Classification of Employees With More Than Four Years Service By Place of Birth	38
7(a)	Recent Employees in Public Sector Firms By Occupational Classification and Place of Birth	39
7(b)	Employees in Public Sector Firms With Four+ Years Service By Occupational Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)	40
8(a)	Recent Employees in Private Sector Firms By Occupational Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)	41
8(b)	Employees in Private Sector Firms With Four+ Years Service By Occupational Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)	42



SEEKING ETHNIC EQUALITY:  
A CASE STUDY OF MIGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT  
POLICIES IN AN INDIAN STATE

The shift from colonial to independent status of many of the developing world's multi-ethnic societies often proved the most disruptive for the very groups that had been receptive to the educational and economic opportunities created by the imperial rulers.<sup>1</sup> Among the first to be both modernized and westernized, these ethnic groups tended to send their children to the new educational institutions created by the Europeans, where they acquired the skills, the work habits, and the languages that eased them into the newly created industries and made it possible for them to man the European-created administrative system. Many took the initiative themselves in creating new industries, establishing banks, opening new marketing networks and in other ways playing a role in the creation of the institutions of a modern society.

Unfortunately for them, and even more unfortunately for their societies, these groups often belonged to an ethnic minority. In many instances they were migrants from other countries or from other parts of their own country. The rulers of the newly independent states, and the social classes which supported them, usually came from the majority ethnic communities, and they viewed the migrant minorities as interlopers who stood in the way of the full expression of the cultural and economic aspirations of the majority communi-

---

<sup>1</sup>I wish to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Martin Slater and Robert Berrier, both graduate students in the Department of Political Science at M.I.T., for preparing the preliminary statistical analysis presented in this paper. I should also like to acknowledge with appreciation the Ford-Rockefeller Foundation Research Program on Population and Development Policy and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development for funding this study.



ties. Since the minorities were typically educators, businessmen, administrators, professionals, and middle level clerks, they threatened the new middle classes emerging within the ethnic majorities. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese majority turned against educated Tamils; in Malaysia, the Malays, declaring themselves the "Bhumiputras" or "sons of the soil," legislated job preferences for themselves over the local Chinese population; in Nigeria, the Hausa and Fulani turned against the Ibos; and in Uganda, President Amin expelled Pakistani and Indian settlers. In country after country migrant minorities were expelled, abused, or discriminated against -- not because they had failed to contribute to the country's economic life, but rather because they had been successful; they were resented not because they were unemployed and imposed a burden on the country's social and welfare services, but because the dominant ethnic majority saw them as barriers to their own aspirations for jobs, status, and wealth.

The ethnic majorities that dominated the new governments pursued a variety of policies intended to increase their own share in the country's economy. When the ethnic minorities originated from outside the country, governments often expelled the migrants -- or their locally born descendants. Several West Africa governments expelled migrants from neighboring countries. Uganda and Burma both expelled Indians and Pakistanis. Sri Lanka negotiated a treaty with India for the repatriation of part of the Tamil population. In both Indonesia and the Philippines, violent attacks against the Chinese led many Chinese to flee the country. Similarly, protectionist policies for the Malays in Malaysia have led some Chinese to move to neighboring Singapore.

When the ethnic minorities originated from areas within the same country, the process was a more complicated one. The Ibos, for example, are resented in North Nigeria, though they are after all Nigerians, entitled to the same rights as other Nigerians; similarly, Bengali white collar workers

in Assam, Gujarati merchants in Bombay, and Punjabi businessmen in Uttar Pradesh are all citizens of India. State governments, so long as they operate within the framework of national law, are generally not able to adopt explicit policies intended to benefit the majority ethnic group, but there are a variety of indirect policies that can change the status of the ethnic majority in relation to the migrant communities.

This paper examines the policies adopted by one of the state governments in India to use migration and employment policies to achieve greater equality among ethnic groups by seeking to expand the employment opportunities for the local majority community, to reduce the opportunities for the migrants and descendants of migrants living within the state, and to reduce or halt the flow of migrants from other states. This case study has two objectives: (1) to show how a government attempts to regulate internal population movements for the achievement of social objectives; and (2) to examine and where possible measure the effects of these policies, both those that are unintended and indirect as well as those that are intended and direct.

We shall begin by describing the state of Assam, India, and the political problems which led government to adopt a set of policies; we then turn to a description of the policies themselves; and finally we shall assess the consequences of these policies.

## 1. The Political Setting

The state of Assam is located in India's northeast. Except for a brief moment in world history during the second world war when Japanese forces moved through northern Burma to Assam's border and Assam became a center for flying supplies to Chinese nationalist forces in southern China, Assam has been an obscure region in southern Asia. Even to most Indians Assam is a

relatively remote region of the subcontinent, linked to India by a small corridor between Bangladesh and Tibet. It has a population (in 1975) of about seventeen million, about the same as Algeria, but it remains one of India's smallest states. Its one major trade connection with the world is its tea, a plentiful crop whose rich color makes it an attractive addition to a variety of blends. When Chinese troops moved from Tibet to the gates of the Assamese town of Tezpur, Prime Minister Nehru in a memorable (but erroneous) statement bade farewell to Assam when it seemed inevitable that Chinese forces would occupy the entire region. To most Indians, few of whom had ever met any Assamese, Assam was nearly as remote as the border regions of Ladakh which also fell under Chinese attack. Even India's national anthem, which mentions most of the regions of India, neglects Assam -- a sore point, incidentally, to many Assamese.

Though obscure to the world and to most of India, Assam is very much a part of the consciousness of large numbers of people in the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal and the neighboring country of Bangladesh. To some 120 million Bengalis, Assam has been a historic frontier region, a place where the landless could seek land and the middle class could find urban employment.

From 1826, when the British dislodged the Burmese invaders who had conquered Assam a few years earlier, to 1874 when it was made a separate province, Assam was part of the Presidency of Bengal. During this half-century the British created tea plantations in the hill areas and linked the region by steamship on the Brahmaputra river to the expanding port at Calcutta. Unable to persuade Assamese cultivators, most of whom owned their own land, that they should work as tea pickers in the plantations, the British "imported" a labor force from the tribal region of southern Bihar. This migration was

soon followed by an influx of Bengali Muslim cultivators, by educated Bengali Hindus seeking positions in the administrative services and in the professions, and by a variety of other migrant traders, merchants, bankers, and industrialists. In time these migrations changed the ethnic composition of the entire region and resulted in the creation of a political system in which questions of ethnicity and migration became central.

Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874 to come under the administration of a chief commissioner; a decade later the area was given the status of a separate state responsible directly to the Viceroy. But its independent status did not last for long. The changes in the political geography of the new state were to play a critical role in the patterns of migration into the entire northeast and in the kinds of political cleavages which characterized the area.

In 1905 the British partitioned the sprawling densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the east and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the west. Assam was incorporated into the eastern province. The partition of Bengal was deeply resented both by the Bengali Hindus and by the Assamese. In 1912 it was annulled and Assam was reestablished as a separate chief commissioners' province that included two Bengali districts -- a predominantly Hindu district, called Cachar, and a predominantly Muslim district, Sylhet. Assam also included the plains of the Brahmaputra valley, where the Assamese-speaking people were predominant, and the surrounding tribal areas -- the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills and the Mizo Hills.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century Bengali Muslim peasants moved into the plains of Assam. But it was not until after 1901 that the major influx took place. By 1911 there were 118,000 migrants, almost all

Bengali Muslims, forming 20% of the district of Goalpara alone. The 1911 census commissioner, alarmed by the massive influx, wrote that the migration was "likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization."

Why the massive influx?

Bengal was one of the most densely populated agricultural regions of the subcontinent. A gradual growth in population on this rice and jute producing delta and a landlord system that contributed to tenancy and to the fragmentation of land holdings resulted in the growth in the number of landless laborers and low income tenants.

In contrast, nearby Assam had a relatively low population density, possibly because of the high mortality rate engendered by rampant malaria and the plague. One district officer, noting that in his district the indigenous population had decreased by 30% from 1891 to 1901, wrote that "not a single British district in the whole of the Indian Empire lost so large a proportion of its population as the unfortunate district of Nowgong."

As the public health situation improved in Assam and the agrarian situation worsened in Bengal, the migration of landless Muslims accelerated. Assam had considerable virgin lands, some in the easily flooded lowlands along the Brahmaputra valley that are similar to the deltaic areas of East Bengal, and it had substantial forest tracts that were occupied, often illegally, by land hungry peasant migrants.

Later on, political factors may have played a role in the migration. With the inclusion of Sylhet and Cachar districts in Assam in the reorganization of 1912, Assam had a large local Bengali Muslim population within its borders. As the Muslim population grew Muslim political parties increased

in political importance. A Muslim League government took power in 1937 and remained in office, except for a one-year interlude, until the close of the second world war. During this period there was an increasing influx of Bengali Muslim migrants into the state, which aroused fears among both Assamese and Bengali Hindus that all of the province might be incorporated into the proposed Muslim state of Pakistan.

Bengali Hindus had been coming into the state ever since Assam had been incorporated into the Presidency of Bengal. The British recruited their administrative staff from among the educated Bengali Hindus in the province. Bengali Hindus were among the first to join the administrative services. Later they entered the modern professions. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, clerks, railway and post office officials as well as officers of the state government in Assam were Bengali Hindu migrants.

Bengali, along with English, became the language of the state government. Bengali became the medium of instruction in the primary and secondary schools, and Bengalis became the teachers of the Assamese. Soon the Assamese perceived themselves as having two sets of alien rulers. Assamese nationalists fought back and by the 1880s managed to have Assamese adopted as the medium in the primary schools. As the number of educated Assamese increased in the twentieth century they turned against the Bengali Hindus, resentful of their domination of the administrative services, fearful of what they saw as a form of cultural imperialism on the part of many Bengalis, and angry at the efforts of Bengalis to treat them as culturally inferior provincial cousins.

In 1947, when independence was achieved, the political geography of Assam was again changed. The Muslim majority district of Sylhet was transferred to the new country of Pakistan. But even without Sylhet, Assam

remained one of the most diverse cultural regions in the Indian subcontinent. It included three groups of native peoples: the Assamese-speaking Hindu population residing primarily in the Brahmaputra valley; the hill tribes (the Garo, Khasi, Naga, Mikir and Mizo), and the indigenous plains' tribals known as the Bodo or Kachari.

The migrant communities included tribal laborers from Bihar and Orissa working in the British-owned tea gardens; Bengali Muslims, mainly from East Bengal, who settled primarily on land along the Brahmaputra valley; Bengali Hindus, originally from East Bengal and especially Sylhet district, who settled in the towns throughout the Brahmaputra valley, where they held middle-class jobs, and in the predominantly Bengali district of Cachar; the Marwaris, an entrepreneurial community from Rajasthan, who engaged in trade, commerce and money-lending; Nepalis who have settled in the low-lying hills around the valley tending cattle; Biharis who worked as seasonal migrants in construction projects and in the towns plying rickshaws; and a small but economically significant number of Punjabis working in the transport industry and in their own businesses.

The Assamese were the largest single ethnic group in the state. But they were not the largest ethnic group in the cities and towns. In 1961 (the last census for which language figures are available), 913,000 people lived in the urban areas of the Brahmaputra valley. Of this population, 38% was Bengali, 33% Assamese, and another 13% spoke Hindi. In their own urban centers the Assamese were outnumbered by the Bengalis, while the surrounding countryside was predominantly Assamese. The towns of Assam had become centers of alien life.

Why had this happened? One reason is that the jobs available in the urban areas of Assam were less attractive to the Assamese than they were to

migrants from neighboring states. A predominantly agricultural people with relatively few landless laborers and tenant farmers, the Assamese had less economic incentive to seek low-paying urban jobs than the rural people of other states. According to the 1961 census only 3.8% of the rural labor force in Assam were agricultural laborers, as compared with 18.9% for India as a whole. Even a decade later when agricultural labor sharply increased in India to 30%, only 10% of the rural Assamese labor force were agricultural laborers. In contrast, 40.8% of the rural labor force in neighboring Bihar were agricultural laborers in 1971 (24.4% in 1961) and 33.8% in rural West Bengal (20.2% in 1961).

A second reason is that the skilled positions in urban Assam had been taken by educated workers from urban West Bengal and from other parts of India. A large proportion of the clerical positions, technical staffs, and managerial personnel consisted of migrants or were native-born descendants of earlier waves of Bengali Hindu migrants.

As the Assamese middle class grew after independence, the major political problems for the Congress-controlled Assamese dominated government were how to expand the employment opportunities of the Assamese in general, and the Assamese middle classes in particular; how to halt (or at least slow) the flow of migrants into Assam's urban centers; and, though less explicit, how to diminish the role of the locally born Bengali Hindu population.

## 2. Policies

The government of Assam had to deal with three groups of employers whose actions affected the job opportunities for the Assamese, the locally born non-Assamese, and the migrants: (1) the state administration of Assam itself, including the large educational sector; (2) the central government,



which not only maintains its own administrative staff within the state, but also runs a number of public sector enterprises, including railroads, an oil refinery, fertilizer plants, coal mines, and banks; and (3) the organized private sector.

Actually, only a small proportion of the entire labor force in the state falls within these three sectors. According to the 1971 census,<sup>2</sup> Assam had a total labor force of 4,240,000. Of these workers, a total of 722,000 (in 1974) were employed in the "organized" sector of the economy.<sup>3</sup> The remainder were in agriculture, household industry, self-employed, or engaged in services and industrial activities where less than ten workers were employed.

In the organized sector, 459,000 worked for private firms, and 263,000 were in the public sector. Most private sector workers, 404,000, were in tea plantations; the remainder were largely in veneer, plywood and match factories, in the repairing and servicing of motor vehicles, and in cotton spinning and weaving mills. In the public sector 31,000 were in central government services, 114,000 in the state or local government, and 43,000 in the central government railways. Another 75,000 persons were in public sector industries, including electric power, coal mining, oil refining, and banking.

The largest number of people working for state and local government were in education -- about 70,000; the medical and health services employed another 11,000.

---

<sup>2</sup>Economic Characteristics of Population, Selected Tables, Census of India, 1971, Series 1-India, Paper 3 of 1972.

<sup>3</sup>Employment data from Employment Review, Assam State, the Directorate of Employment and Craftsman Training, Research and Statistical Cell, Gauhati, Assam, March 1974.

Only 55,000 workers in the state -- 8% of the labor force in the organized sector and a mere 1.3% of the total labor force in the entire state -- were employed in the organized private sector. Nearly five times that number worked for the central government (including the public sector), and one and a half times that number were in educational services. It is important to note, however, that while government policy was directed at affecting only a small portion of employment in the state, it was the organized sector that employed the bulk of the secondary school and college graduates, paid the highest wages, and provided the greatest security of tenure, as compared with the unorganized sector of the economy. It was also the sector of the economy dominated by the non-Assamese, especially by Bengali Hindus, and Hindi speakers. It was, in short, the "modern" sector into which the expanding Assamese middle class aspired to enter.

Three sets of policies were adopted by the state and central government to influence migration and employment: (1) education policies, (2) employment policies and (3) migration policies.

#### (1) Education Policies

In an ethnically divided society there are invariably struggles over the control of the school system. What is at stake are some of the most central values in a society: social mobility for the young, employment opportunities for graduates as teachers, and, of course, control over an institution that shapes the fundamental cultural symbols of the society. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Bengalis had established for themselves a central place in the educational system. Because Bengali was the medium of instruction, the teachers were Bengali. Local colleges were affiliated to Calcutta, and Assamese who sought higher education often went

to Calcutta for advanced studies -- again in Bengali.

The struggle by Assamese nationalists to gain control over the educational system began in the end of the nineteenth century when they established Assamese as the medium of instruction for Assamese children in the primary and secondary schools. After independence the primary and secondary school system was substantially expanded and whenever possible the government created Assamese medium schools even in areas in which Bengali Muslims or tea plantation migrant laborers were numerous. Under central government law, state governments were required to provide schools in the mother tongue of children if requested by parents. In Assam, however, Bengali Muslims and migrant tribals were generally provided with Assamese language schools. Bengali Hindus continued to insist that their schools be in Bengali. The Bengalis also opposed efforts to declare Assamese the exclusive official language of the state, a move they interpreted as a step by the Assamese to undermine the position of the Bengali-medium schools whose graduates might find themselves handicapped when they sought jobs in the state government.

Throughout the 1960s there were bitter clashes over the question of language medium in the schools and the status of Assamese as the official language of the state. Perhaps the bitterest and most violent conflict took place in 1972 in a controversy over whether Bengali could be used for examinations at Gauhati University -- a decision that had obvious implications for primary and secondary school language policies. The Academic Council of Gauhati University, whose jurisdiction extended to colleges in the predominantly Bengali Cachar district as well as throughout the Brahmaputra valley, ruled that Assamese would be the exclusive medium of instruction in the colleges and university, but that students could retain the option of

answering examination questions in Bengali. Demonstrations by the Student Union, teachers at Gauhati University, and by the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the state's paramount literary association, led the Council to reverse its decision on the question of a Bengali option. There was then an uproar in Cachar district where one of the colleges filed a petition in the Supreme Court arguing that the university's decision to restrict the medium of instruction to Assamese was a violation of a constitutional provision which assured protection for linguistic minorities. Large-scale arson and looting took place in several towns in the valley, and as the violence spread the central government called in the military to reestablish order. The Chief Minister announced that he would stand by the final decision of the Academic Council and that he would not carry out a compromise proposal by the Assembly to create a separate Bengali university for Cachar district. While the Assembly's compromise was interpreted by Assamese militants as an unacceptable step toward a multi-lingual state, the new announcement of the Chief Minister was greeted by the Bengali Hindus as a step toward forced Assamization. One Bengali letter writer to a Calcutta newspaper expressed his fear that "the recurring disturbances are aimed not at usurping the Bengali language but at driving out the entire Bengali population from Assam."

The objectives of the policy itself thus became an issue. Some saw the Assamese guided by a cultural nationalism, concerned with assuring that their own language, and hence the Assamese themselves, would be in a politically and culturally dominant role. Others saw the policy directed at increasing the need for Assamese teachers in the colleges and secondary schools, since the use of Assamese as the medium of instruction in all subjects assured the Assamese that they would hold a dominant position in employment in all areas of education. And finally, some saw the policy as "driving out" Bengalis or at least discouraging potential Bengali migrants

from entering the state. Most likely, among Assamese supporters of the Chief Minister there were individuals who held each of these views.

While data on the ethnic composition of school teachers and college faculty in Assam are not available -- indeed, it is striking how little hard data there is on the relationship between ethnicity and education, employment or income in a state whose government is so explicitly concerned with improving the position of one ethnic community -- it is generally agreed that there has been a substantial increase in the number and proportion of Assamese in the state's educational system at all levels.

## (2) Employment Policies

The pressure for a policy of giving preferences to local people both in public and private employment had been mounting for many years, but it became more acute in the 1960s at a time of growing educated unemployment. In 1959 the Employment Exchanges Compulsory Notification of Vacancies Act was passed by the national parliament requiring that all employers, both public and private, were required to inform local employment exchanges of newly available jobs. Employers were not, however, required to hire candidates submitted by the exchanges.

Two bodies pressed for a more active "hire-local" policy: the centrally appointed National Labour Commission, and the National Integration Council, which consists of state Chief Ministers and high officials of the central government.

The National Labour Commission recommended that both central and state governments actively pursue a policy of giving preferences to local people in their own employment and that they use their influence to urge private

employers to do likewise.<sup>4</sup> The Chairman of the National Labour Commission noted that the problem was less one of objectives than of implementation. He reported that the Commission had received many complaints that instructions issued earlier by the central government to public sector undertakings to give preferences to local people were not properly observed. "In one public sector undertaking," he said, "not even a car driver was recruited locally." The tendency, he continued, "was that almost all the employees in a public sector undertaking were from the same region to which the top officials of the undertaking belonged."

The National Integration Council similarly recommended that the public sector give preferences to local people in order to "remove the discontent in the States arising from the inadequate share of the local people in employment opportunities in the public and private sectors."<sup>5</sup>

In August 1968 the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Labour and Employment announced that "the public sector undertakings have been asked to fill vacancies carrying a monthly salary of less than Rs 500 through the local employment exchanges. The recruitment to higher posts has, however, to be made on an all-India basis in order to attract the right type of talent. Local people, possessing the required qualifications will, of course, be eligible and shall be considered for all such posts."

The government further explained that gazetted posts within the government -- the higher salaried, more senior positions in the administrative services -- would continue to take place through the Union Public Service

---

<sup>4</sup>Report of the National Commission on Labour, Government of India Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, New Delhi, 1969. The recommendations of the Commission on the demands of "sons of the soil" can be found on pp. 74-78.

<sup>5</sup>National Integration Council Proceedings, New Delhi, March 20, 1969.

Commission, but that recruitment for the lesser non-gazetted positions would be made through the local employment exchanges. The Labour Ministry also announced that the government had asked the all-India Organization of Employers to use their good offices to ensure that their constituents would implement the recommendations of the National Integration Council concerning the employment of local persons. State Labour Ministers were also instructed to persuade private sector employers to take similar actions.

One Labour Minister replied that in his state the private employers seldom made use of the employment exchange machinery, and he raised the issue of whether more pressure could not be put on private employers to hire locally through the exchanges. Soem raised the question of whether the act could be amended so that employment through the exchanges would be made compulsory.<sup>6</sup>

The central government was unwilling to amend the legislation. The National Commission on Labour, which considered the proposal, expressed a reluctance to give up the notion that a citizen of India should be able to secure employment in any part of the country, even as it pressed employers to give preferences to local people. Article 16 of the Indian constitution provides that "there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment...." and that "no citizen shall, on ground only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for or discriminated against in respect of any employment...."

---

<sup>6</sup>According to figures published by the Labour Ministry, nearly 60% of the notifications of vacancies to the exchanges resulted in direct placements. In 1968, for example, 3,161,000 persons were registered in the country's 405 exchanges; 551,000 vacancies were notified and 319,000 placements were effected. In Assam, however, only 3,751 placements were made for 8,623 vacancies, a placement/vacancy record of 43%. Only 6% of those registered found jobs through the exchanges in Assam that year, as compared with 10% nationally. (Report of the National Commission on Labour, Appendix I.)

The Commission noted too that ordinarily industry preferred to employ local people but that "certain regional groups have traditionally specialized in particular jobs." Dock workers in Bombay, for example, tend to be Telugus, and construction workers are often from Rajasthan. The Commission reported that "because some groups have been identified as suited to particular types of work, employers have shown preference for them" and that in any case, there were advantages in having a homogeneous labor force. While the Commission concluded that there was a need nonetheless to shift employment to local people, they were evidently reluctant to press for a policy that would break up these traditional employment patterns.

The Commission recommended that in the case of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, clerks and other non-technical staff, preferences should be given to local people, but that as the skill requirements increased there was a need to seek recruits from a larger area than covered by a local employment exchange. Hence, middle level technical and non-technical posts (known as Class I junior scale in the Government of India) should be recruited on an all-India basis, even by the private sector. The same considerations seemed to the Commission to be relevant for higher non-technical posts, e.g., top general management officials in finance, accounts, sales, purchase, personnel management, etc., and for the higher technical posts where, concluded the Commission, "the best qualified persons will have to be recruited, either by advertisement on an all-India basis or by personal contact."

Finally, the Commission members evidently recognized that whatever employment procedures were required for the private sector -- such as the compulsory use of employment exchanges -- would have to be applied to the public sector as well, and that such a change in policy was likely to be opposed by the nationally minded Union Public Service Commission.



Alternatively, the Commission recommended that a variety of new employment procedures be adopted both by public and private sector firms to increase the possibility that qualified local persons would be given preference over equally qualified persons from other areas, including the establishment of special Recruitment Committees with a nominee from the state government within which the firm is located, and through regular reporting procedures by the firm to the state government.

Government policy calling for the employment of local people in both private and public sector jobs, therefore, provided no sanctions. There were no penalties against employers who failed to notify employment exchanges of vacancies, and there was no requirement that anyone had to hire through the exchanges for any level of jobs. Moreover, the directives of the central government were not always explicit about whether locality referred to city, district or state, or whether "local" meant place of birth, length of residence, or ethnic origin. To the extent that the central government was explicit, however, "local" meant birthplace and residence, never ethnic origin, a definition at variance with the thinking of most state political leaders.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the vagueness of the notion "local" and the absence of legal penalties indicates that the policies discussed here served only the symbolic purpose of assuaging the demands of local people for more employment. As far as the government of Assam was concerned, they were quite clear as to what they meant by "local", nor was the state government without any powers to enforce its policy objectives.

The explicit policy of both the central and state government was to slow the pace of migration into a state by giving preferential employment to

local people. For the government of Assam there was another objective: to increase the ratio of employment as between Assamese and local Bengalis. While none of the legislation or directives to employers explicitly distinguished between Assamese and locally born but ethnically non-Assamese, the government of Assam clearly did not intend to provide job preferences for Bengalis born in Assam. The actual intent of the policy was set forth by the Employment Review Committee appointed by the Assamese state legislature to review the status of Assamese employment in the state:<sup>7</sup>

.... in the absence of any clear-cut definition of the term "local people," the Committee has had to base its analysis as place of birth in Assam being the yardstick of local people. This yardstick is palpably inadequate and misleading and a clear understanding should be there in government and all others concerned in the matter as to what is meant by the term "local people"....

But the Committee was evidently legally restrained from providing its own "clear-cut definition" of the term "local people."

There are many ways in which a determined state government can press employers -- particularly in the private sector -- to implement such a policy. Private firms need the support of the state government in their dealings with central government ministries over licenses for imports, exports, the purchase of rationed raw materials, etc. There are also innumerable ways in which the state government can harass uncooperative employers, involving the enforcement of labor laws, the factory acts, and taxes. Finally, there is always the threat that young street gangs will burn, loot and vandalize shops, warehouses, and factories owned by alien entrepreneurs who do not pay sufficient attention to local demands over hiring.

---

<sup>7</sup>Report of the Employment Review Committee, Third Report, 1973 (Assembly Secretariat, Gauhati, Assam, December 1973), p. 357.

### (3) Migration Policies

An act of the Indian Parliament passed in 1950 entitled the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act to remove "infiltrators" who had entered the country illegally after 1947, and a bill passed by the Assam legislature shortly after independence declaring squatter settlements illegal were both important instruments for controlling the Bengali Muslim population. Bengali Muslims were fearful that these two acts might be used to force earlier migrants (many of whom held land illegally, and a few of whom could prove that they had migrated before 1947) to leave the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bengali Muslims declared that their mother tongue was Assamese, that they accepted the establishment of primary and secondary schools in Assamese for their children, and that they supported the government against the Bengali Hindus on the issue of an official language for the state and the university.

In neighboring Tripura, a state dominated by Bengali Hindus, the Immigration Act was enforced, resulting in a substantial return migration of Bengali Muslims to East Pakistan between 1961 and 1971, as reflected in an absolute decline in the Muslim population from 230,000 in 1961 to 103,000 in 1971. But in Assam, where the Bengali Muslims proved to be politically supportive of the Assamese Hindus, the Muslim population of Assam continued to grow between 1961 and 1971 at more or less the national rate; indeed, the earlier 1961 census indicated that the Muslim population in Assam had increased by a quarter of a million more than could be accounted for either through natural population increase or migration of Muslims from other states. This surplus may be taken to reflect illegal migration from East Pakistan.

### 3. Policy Effects

Our analysis of the policies adopted by the state government in the areas of education, employment, and migration has led us to conclude that the government's objective was to increase the share of employment in the state by the local Assamese-speaking population and to win the support of Bengali Muslims for such a policy. In assessing how effective this policy has been it is important to distinguish between the outcomes that were sought, direct and visible, and those outcomes that were unintended, which were often indirect and even invisible to the policy maker and to the public. The former, to which we turn first, can be measured by changes in the composition of the labor force, while the latter requires a broader look at a number of economic, social and political changes in the region.

#### (1) Direct, Intended and Visible Effects

In 1968 the government of Assam established an Employment Review Committee to conduct a survey of employment and report their findings to the Assam Legislative Assembly.<sup>8</sup> Over a period of forty-one months, from May 1969 to December 1972, the Committee studied 28 firms, both public and private, located in the Brahmaputra valley. A questionnaire was completed by each of these firms providing data on their labor force -- their place of birth, mother tongue, occupation categories, wages, duration of service, and educational levels. Some of the data proved to be unusable for our purposes, partly because each company devised its own format on some categories, the standard job classification schema was not followed, and information on

---

<sup>8</sup>Report of the Employment Review Committee, Vol. I, II and III (First, Second and Third Reports), 1973.

procedures for recruitment was only sporadically collected. Within these limitations, however, the survey provides us with an unusually rich source of information concerning the relationship between ethnicity and employment in one region of India, and makes it possible to examine how this relationship has been changing.

In one sense it may be premature to look at the impact of government policy on employment, for the central government did not issue detailed directives until 1968, and the survey was conducted within only a year or two after the policy was formally put into effect. However, the government of Assam has been pressing firms to give preferences to local people at least since the early 1960s. Moreover, labor turnover for many of the low paying manual occupations is quite high so that changes in the ethnic composition of the labor force are possible within a brief time period. One can, therefore, discern some trends by examining recent recruitment.

These firms employed 29,537 persons in a total labor force in the organized sector of 722,000. Excluded from this latter figure are those employed in agriculture, the self-employed, all who work in establishments in the private sector employing less than ten workers, and members of the defense forces.

The firms surveyed included the major banks, trading companies, transportation, extractive and manufacturing industries, and a research laboratory. Eighteen of the firms are privately owned, though several are partially owned by the government of Assam, and ten are wholly in the public sector. Ten of the firms operate exclusively in Assam (e.g., the Sarda Plywood Factory, the Woodcraft Plywood Factory, the Assam Oil Company, the Assam Railways and Trading Company, Everest Cycles), while eighteen are branches or divisions of a firm outside Assam (including the banks, Indian Airlines, the Fertilizer

Corporation, the Food Corporation, India Carbon, Indian Refineries, Oil India, the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, and the Regional Research Laboratory). These are among the largest firms in Assam. They are all highly visible, and most of them have a substantial white-collar labor force.

Not included in the survey were tea plantations, central, state and local government services, and education which together employ nearly three-quarters of the labor force in the organized sector. The survey, therefore, represents a sample of the industrial sector in which about 183,000 persons were employed.

#### Assamese and non-Assamese Employment

Approximately one-half of the employees in the survey (14,367 or 49%) were born in Assam. Nearly three-quarters of these (10,469 or 73%) report Assamese as their mother tongue. In other words slightly more than a third of the labor force in the survey (35%) are Assamese "sons of the soil."

The Bengalis constitute the second largest ethnic group. Of all employees, 23% (6,713) were Bengali, with slightly less than half of these (46%) born in Assam. No other indigenous ethnic group has such a large proportion of its members born in the state.

Hindi speakers were a close third, with 21% (6,183) of all employees. But most of these (94%) were born outside of the state. The remaining 21% of the labor force whose mother tongue was neither Assamese, Bengali, nor Hindi were almost entirely migrants. Of these, 43% spoke Nepali, 31% Telugu, 8% Punjabi and 6% Malayali. Of this group, 93% came from outside of the state.

It should be noted that the indigenous tribal population, though constituting 6% of the total population of the state, account for less than

1% of the employees in the firms surveyed.

Were there a typical firm that perfectly reflected the ethnic distribution of the labor force, it would look like this:

For each 100 workers:

49 are born in Assam, of whom

35 are Assamese

11 are Bengali

1 speaks Hindi

1 is a local tribal

1 speaks another regional language

51 are migrants, of whom

12 are Bengali

20 are Hindi

8 are Nepali

6 are Telugu

1 is a Punjabi

1 is a Malayali and

3 speak other regional languages

These figures only partially reflect the ethnic distribution in urban areas. As noted earlier, in the Brahmaputra valley (where all the firms surveyed were located) the Assamese constituted 33% of the urban population, Bengalis 38%, Hindi speakers 13%, and 16% spoke other languages. The Hindi speakers thus held a disproportionate share of jobs in industry, as do speakers of other minority languages. But it should be noted that these groups are primarily migrants and that therefore a larger proportion are

members of the labor force than are locally born Bengalis and Assamese.<sup>9</sup> The "underrepresentation" of the Bengalis probably reflects the fact that many Bengalis work in government services, in the professions, or in smaller firms, not included in this survey. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the Assamese in the urban areas are proportionately represented in industrial employment.

Who employs the Assamese, and for what kinds of jobs? How does the pattern of employment for Assamese differ from that of the non-Assamese? And what kind of firms hire few Assamese?

1. The public sector firms, with the notable exception of the banks (which were nationalized in 1969), tend to hire Assamese to a greater extent than do the private firms. The seven large public sector firms in the survey, employing nearly 12,000 persons, were 51% Assamese, 15% Bengali and 17% Hindi. Among sixteen private firms, employing 15,000 persons, only 23% were Assamese, 23% were Bengali and the largest, 27%, were Hindi. Five banks, employing about 2,500 persons, were predominantly Bengali, with the Assamese forming about a fourth of the labor force. In short, public sector firms, banks excepted, hire Assamese at more than twice the rate of privately owned firms (Table 1).

2. Two factors, surprisingly, seemed not to be significant determinants of the ethnicity of the labor force: the size of the firm and the location of its head office. There is a slightly higher proportion of migrants employed in the smaller firms than in the larger ones, but the differences

---

<sup>9</sup>The high migration rate into Assam's urban areas is reflected in the sex ratio. The sex ratio of Assam's urban areas (in 1971) was 665 women per thousand males, while in Gauhati, Assam's largest city, only 39% of the population was female. (Census of India, General Population Tables, Series 3 - Assam, Part II-A, 1971.)



Table 1

Employees in Twenty-Eight Firms;  
Sector of Activity by Mother Tongue

Mother Tongue	Public Sector excl. banks	Private Sector	Banks	Total
Assamese	6,073 (51.4%)	3,555 (23.3%)	845 (34.1%)	10,473 (35.4%)
Bengali	1,799 (15.2%)	3,548 (23.3%)	1,366 (55.1%)	6,713 (22.7%)
Hindi	1,998 (16.9%)	4,084 (26.8%)	101 (4.1%)	6,183 (21.0%)
Other	1,939 (16.5%)	4,062 (26.6%)	167 (6.7%)	6,168 (20.9%)
Total	11,809 (100.0%)	15,249 (100.0%)	2,479 (100.0%)	29,537 (100.0%)

N.B. Table refers to mother tongue of employees, not to migrant status (place of birth) as in some later tables. Many Bengali speakers, for instance, are not migrants.

are not great. There is no reason to believe, therefore, that the larger firms are more easily affected by government pressures to hire Assamese. And when the head office is located outside of Assam, there is also no tendency for firms to hire more migrants, largely because most recruitment takes place locally.

To assess the reason for the differences between the public and private sector recruitment let us take a look at the recruitment procedures and at the occupational characteristics of the firms that have a high proportion of Assamese and the firms that have a high proportion of migrants or local non-Assamese.

There are fifteen firms whose labor force is less than one-third Assamese (see Appendix 1). One, the Indian Airlines, is owned by the government, two are publicly owned banks, and the remainder are private firms. They are primarily low technology industrial firms. Five are plywood and match factories, three are textile mills, one produces cycles, one is a small steel processing factory, one is in carbon, one in oil, another in railway shipping. A large part of the labor force in these factories are low paid, unskilled or semi-skilled workers.

As we look at the characteristics of the labor force of each of these fifteen firms and the process by which recruitment takes place, the following emerge:

1. A number of these firms use, or once used, labor contractors to import unskilled laborers from other states. Even when labor contractors are no longer used, laborers are often recruited from among the friends and relatives of those who already work in the factory. In either event the results are a well-established chain migration between Assam and the Hindi-speaking areas, particularly from nearby Bihar.

2. Some firms hire "at the gate." As labor is needed each day, especially when there is considerable absenteeism of migrant workers who have returned home, employers hire from among those who appear at the gate in the morning. Wages for such workers are initially very low -- often as little as Rs 1.50 per day. Those who remain for three months or longer are then given higher wages. Since the initial wages, and even the wages after three or six months, are often below what Assamese earn in the countryside (but higher than agricultural laborers can earn in Bihar or U.P. when there is no employment at all) few Assamese seek such jobs.

3. Migrants hold jobs at both ends of the occupational spectrum. In the twenty-eight firms surveyed, 79% of the jobs are manual compared with 21% that are white collar. The majority of the manual jobs (53%) are held by migrants. In the white collar positions, only 39% of the managerial positions are held by persons born in Assam, and 59% of subordinate clerical or technical positions (Table 2). But a large proportion of these jobs are held by locally born Bengalis, not Assamese. Unfortunately, data on mother tongue were available for only eight of the twenty-eight firms. Among the locally born, in these eight firms 44% of the managers are Assamese speakers, 48% of the clerical and technical workers, 68% of the skilled workers, and 49% of the unskilled workers. In short, even among the locally born less than half are Assamese speakers (Table 3).

For the higher status managerial jobs, therefore, the Assamese compete primarily against migrants; for the clerical and technical positions, the Assamese lose out to locally born Bengalis and then secondarily to migrants; and in the low-skilled positions, the Assamese compete -- to the extent that they are interested in these jobs -- against migrants.

In what respect do these patterns differ in firms that hire a larger

Table 2

Occupational Classification of Employees by Place of Birth

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	652 (39.0%)	1,021 (61.0%)	1,673 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	2,810 (59.4%)	1,916 (40.6%)	4,726 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	3,462 (54.1%)	2,937 (45.9%)	6,399 (100.0%)
3. skilled*	5,750 (57.4%)	4,261 (42.6%)	10,011 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	5,153 (39.3%)	7,971 (60.7%)	13,124 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	10,903 (47.1%)	12,232 (52.9%)	23,135 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	14,365 (48.6%)	15,169 (51.4%)	29,534 (100.0%)

\* includes subordinates in banks

Table 3

Employees in Eight Firms\*

Mother Tongue of Non-Migrants by Occupational Classification

Occupational Classification	Mother Tongue		Total
	Assamese	Non-Assamese	
1. managerial	80 (44.0%)	102 (56.0%)	182 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	653 (48.1%)	704 (51.9%)	1,357 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	733 (47.6%)	806 (52.4%)	1,539 (100.0%)
3. skilled**	322 (58.6%)	227 (41.4%)	549 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	315 (43.6%)	407 (56.4%)	722 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	637 (50.1%)	634 (49.9%)	1,271 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	1,370 (48.8%)	1,440 (51.2%)	2,810 (100.0%)

\*8 firms are  
 Assam Hardboards  
 Assam Railroads and Trading Co.  
 India Airlines  
 National Grindlays Bank  
 Punjab National Bank  
 State Bank of India  
 United Bank of India  
 United Commercial Bank

Note the high proportion of banks -- this may bias the sample because the banks have a reputation for employing non-migrant Bengalis.

\*\* includes subordinates in banks

proportion of Assamese? We have already noted that public sector firms tend to hire few migrants and more Assamese than private firms: 51% of the workers in seven public sector firms are Assamese, as against only 23% of the sixteen private firms in the survey (Table 1). But the differences are not in the categories of managerial or clerical personnel. In these categories, in fact, public sector firms hire proportionately more migrants than do private firms: 69% of the managers and 53% of the clerical staff in the public firms are migrants, compared with 53% and 45% respectively in private firms (Tables 4(a) and 4(b)). In the public firms, senior jobs are advertised nationally and job interviews are ordinarily held outside of Assam. Many of the senior positions are held by men who have been transferred from other parts of the country by the same firm.

It is at the level of the employment of manual workers that local people do substantially better in the public sector firms. Migrants make up only 36% of the manual labor force in the public sector as against 65% in the private sector (for descriptions of four public sector firms that employ large numbers of Assamese see Appendix 2).

Several of the public sector firms have made a special effort to seek locally qualified personnel for jobs in the lower clerical positions. One company, for example, has a selection committee with a liaison officer from the government of Assam, seeking local people for such positions. At the more senior administrative and technical levels, the public sector firms all recruit nationally, that is, they hire personnel through national advertising and through the Union Public Service Commission, with interviews in Delhi, Calcutta and Madras and almost never in Gauhati.

In considering why public sector firms have been more successful in hiring local people for the lower paid less-skilled jobs than have the

Table 4(a)

Employees in Public Sector Firms by Occupational  
Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	266 (31.1%)	590 (68.9%)	856 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	563 (46.8%)	640 (53.2%)	1,203 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	829 (40.3%)	1,230 (59.7%)	2,059 (100.0%)
3. skilled	3,801 (65.9%)	1,966 (34.1%)	5,767 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	2,420 (60.8%)	1,558 (39.2%)	3,978 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	6,221 (63.8%)	3,524 (36.2%)	9,745 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	7,050 (59.7%)	4,754 (40.3%)	11,804 (100.0%)

Table 4(b)

Employees in Private Sector Firms by Occupational  
Classification and Place of Birth

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	216 (47.0%)	244 (53.0%)	460 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	1,128 (54.6%)	939 (45.4%)	2,067 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	1,344 (53.2%)	1,183 (46.8%)	2,527 (100.0%)
3. skilled	1,508 (42.1%)	2,073 (57.9%)	3,581 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	2,733 (29.9%)	6,413 (70.1%)	9,146 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	4,241 (33.3%)	8,486 (66.7%)	12,727 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	5,585 (36.6%)	9,669 (63.4%)	15,254 (100.0%)



private firms, a number of differences should be kept in mind: wages are generally higher in the public sector; there is no practice of initial low-wage apprenticeships; there is no daily wage-labor recruitment at the gate; conditions of work are generally preferable in public than private sector firms; a higher proportion of the manual work force is engaged in jobs requiring some skills; and there is more security and less turnover in public sector jobs. These factors may explain why Assamese are more likely to seek recruitment in the public than private sector firms.

### Changing Patterns of Employment

What changes have taken place in the pattern of employment for various types of jobs, and to what extent can these changes be attributed to government policy?

There have been only modest increases in employment in the organized sector in Assam in recent years. The industrial slowdown that has affected the entire country since the late sixties has affected Assam as well. Private sector employment actually declined slightly between 1964 and 1969. Much of the new employment, especially in the private sector, represents replacements rather than expansion. There has been some increase in employment by the banks since they were nationalized. And some of the public sector firms are themselves relatively new and have recruited their labor force since 1960. It is interesting to note that the older firms (pre-1947) have a higher proportion of both unskilled (70%) and skilled (55%) workers who are migrants as compared with firms started after 1960 (where 46% of the unskilled and 39% of the skilled workers are migrants) (Table 5).

Comparisons of place of birth of employees recruited within the last four years of the survey compared with the remainder of the labor force

Table 5

Employees by Occupational Classification,  
Migrant Status, and Founding Date of Firm

Occupational Classification	Total Employees	<u>FOUNDING DATE OF FIRM</u>						Total Employees	Migrant Employees	% Age Migrants
		<u>Pre-1947</u>	% Age Migrants	<u>1947-1959</u>	% Age Migrants	<u>1960--</u>				
		Migrant Employees				Total Employees	Migrant Employees	% Age Migrants		Migrant Employees
1. managerial	445	230	51.7	330	176	53.3	898	615	68.5	
2. clerical	1,736	653	37.6	1,523	471	30.9	1,467	792	54.0	
A. WHITE COLLAR	2,181	883	40.5	1,853	647	34.9	2,365	1,407	59.5	
3. skilled	2,146	1,175	54.8	754	301	39.9	7,111	2,785	39.2	
4. unskilled	6,995	4,915	70.3	1,242	816	65.7	4,887	2,240	45.8	
B. MANUAL	9,141	6,090	66.6	1,996	1,117	56.0	11,998	5,025	41.9	
C. TOTAL	11,322	6,973	61.6	3,849	1,764	45.8	14,363	6,432	44.8	

reveals a number of trends: (Tables 6(a) and 6(b))

1. There has been an overall decline in the proportion of migrant employment.

2. The decline has been primarily in manual jobs. Migrants make up 55% of recently employed unskilled workers as compared to an overall figure of 67% for those with more than four years of service.

3. The proportion of migrants among white collar employees has not significantly changed, although there has been a slight increase in the proportion of migrants holding managerial positions.

4. The patterns are somewhat different as between the public and private sector firms. In the public sector there has actually been an increase in the employment of migrants for white collar positions, both managerial and clerical (75% and 65% respectively among recent appointments as compared with 68% and 52% for all appointments in these categories) (Tables 7(a) and 7(b)). In contrast in the private sector there has been an increase in the employment of local people for managerial positions, but not clerical workers (Tables 8(a) and 8(b)).

Among manual workers, there has been relatively little change in the public sector where local people have always been more numerous, but in the private sector 40% of the recently employed manual workers are locals, as against 35% for the entire privately employed manual labor force.

There are three factors at work which encourage an increase in the employment of non-migrants at both ends of the occupational spectrum apart from government policy. One is that there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of agricultural laborers in rural Assam, from 3.8% in 1961 to 10% in 1971, so that a larger number of rural Assamese are available for unskilled, low-wage occupations than previously. One test of this hypothesis

Table 6(a)

Occupational Classification of Recent\* Employees by Place of Birth

\* refers to employees with 0-4 years length of service, save in cases of

Oil and Natural Gas Commission	0-5 years
Sarda Plywood Factory	0-3 years
Woodcraft-Mariani	--
Punjab National Bank	0-2 years

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	414 (35.6%)	750 (64.4%)	1,164 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	1,263 (59.2%)	872 (40.8%)	2,135 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	1,677 (50.8%)	1,622 (49.2%)	3,299 (100.0%)
3. skilled	3,446 (61.5%)	2,156 (38.5%)	5,602 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	3,039 (45.1%)	3,695 (54.9%)	6,734 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	6,485 (52.6%)	5,851 (47.4%)	12,336 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	8,162 (52.2%)	7,473 (47.8%)	15,635 (100.0%)

Table 6(b)

Occupational Classification of Employees With  
More Than Four Years\* Service by Place of Birth

\*save for cases listed in previous table where length of service is above the limits previously indicated

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	238 (46.7%)	271 (53.3%)	509 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	1,547 (59.7%)	1,044 (40.3%)	2,591 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	1,785 (57.6%)	1,315 (42.4%)	3,100 (100.0%)
3. skilled	2,304 (52.3%)	2,105 (47.7%)	4,409 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	2,114 (33.1%)	4,276 (66.9%)	6,390 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	4,418 (40.9%)	6,381 (59.1%)	10,799 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	6,203 (44.6%)	7,696 (55.4%)	13,899 (100.0%)

Table 7(a)

Recent Employees in Public Sector Firms by Occupational  
Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	161 (24.7%)	491 (75.3%)	652 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	254 (34.6%)	479 (65.4%)	733 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	415 (30.0%)	970 (70.0%)	1,385 (100.0%)
3. skilled	2,502 (68.4%)	1,155 (31.6%)	3,657 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	1,620 (54.7%)	1,339 (45.3%)	2,959 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	4,122 (62.3%)	2,494 (37.7%)	6,616 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	4,537 (56.7%)	3,464 (43.3%)	8,001 (100.0%)

Table 7(b)

Employees in Public Sector Firms With Four+ Years Service By  
Occupational Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	105 (51.5%)	99 (48.5%)	204 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	309 (65.7%)	161 (34.3%)	470 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	414 (61.4%)	260 (38.6%)	674 (100.0%)
3. skilled	1,299 (61.6%)	811 (38.4%)	2,110 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	800 (78.5%)	219 (21.5%)	1,019 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	2,099 (67.1%)	1,030 (32.9%)	3,129 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	2,413 (77.1%)	1,290 (22.9%)	3,703 (100.0%)

Table 8(a)

Recent Employees in Private Sector Firms By Occupational  
Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	143 (51.8%)	133 (48.2%)	276 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	305 (56.9%)	231 (43.1%)	536 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	448 (55.2%)	364 (44.8%)	812 (100.0%)
3. skilled	680 (42.3%)	928 (57.7%)	1,608 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	1,481 (38.6%)	2,356 (61.4%)	3,837 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	2,161 (39.7%)	3,284 (60.3%)	5,445 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	2,609 (41.7%)	3,648 (58.3%)	6,257 (100.0%)



Table 8(b)

Employees in Private Sector Firms With Four+ Years Service By  
Occupational Classification and Place of Birth (Excluding Banks)

Occupational Classification	Place of Birth		Total
	Assam (non-migrants)	outside Assam (migrants)	
1. managerial	73 (39.7%)	111 (60.3%)	184 (100.0%)
2. clerical/ supervisory technical	823 (53.8%)	708 (46.2%)	1,531 (100.0%)
A. WHITE COLLAR	896 (52.2%)	819 (47.8%)	1,715 (100.0%)
3. skilled	828 (42.0%)	1,145 (58.0%)	1,973 (100.0%)
4. unskilled	1,252 (23.6%)	4,057 (76.4%)	5,309 (100.0%)
B. MANUAL	2,080 (28.6%)	5,202 (71.4%)	7,282 (100.0%)
C. TOTAL	2,976 (33.1%)	6,021 (66.9%)	8,997 (100.0%)

is whether there is an increase in the movement of Assamese from the countryside to the city. In the past the rate of urbanization of the Assamese was considerably below that of the rest of the country. There is some preliminary evidence that this rate is changing, though we shall know better when detailed migration data are available.

A second factor is the increase in higher paying low-skilled jobs in the public sector that are attractive to rural Assamese. To the extent that wages in these positions have become competitive with wages in the rural sector, we can expect Assamese to move at a greater rate into the industrial labor force.

Thirdly, at the clerical and managerial levels, there are now more educated Assamese available than ever before. Even without a system of preferences we should expect some changes in the composition of this section of the labor force.

Undoubtedly, government pressure on employees to hire more local people has made some difference. Public sector firms, most of which are newer than the private firms, do not use labor contractors and explicitly seek to hire local people. Private firms, responsive to pressures, have made a greater effort to hire local people, especially Assamese, for the more visible staff positions. But it is important to note that policy is supportive of trends that are in any event already at work. For a policy maker the politically most attractive policy is one which requires individuals to do what they might do anyway, and which the electorate welcomes. One is reminded -- though perhaps the analogy is too strong -- of the comment of the king in St. Exupery's whimsical tale, The Little Prince, that he governs his happy kingdom by ordering his subjects to do what they want to do. In this instance, of course, nativist agitation and public policy combine to encourage employers

to do what they can easily do, but which some employers might prefer not to do.

(2) Indirect, Unintended and Invisible Effects

Whenever policies are intended to single out a social or ethnic group for benefits, especially when these take the form, to use Nathan Glazer's phrase for such policies in the United States, of "affirmative discrimination," there are bound to be wide-ranging effects upon the behavior of those who do not benefit from the policy. Employers are asked to hire some people whom they might not have otherwise hired. Local people who do not belong to the preferred ethnic group fear that they are being discriminated against and members of the preferred ethnic group are likely to be angry at employers who do not satisfactorily adhere to the government's policies. There are many consequences of the policy that are not easily measurable or observable: the fears and anxieties of the minorities over employment and job promotions, the educational and employment prospects of their children, fears of violence, and above all, a sense that their personal prospects rest not on their individual behavior and educational attainments, but on the prospects of the ethnic group to which they belong. When the objective of government is to change the income and status of one ethnic group in relation to another, one of the central effects of policy is that it reinforces ethnic group identities.

In the 1960s and early 1970s a number of major economic, political, and social changes took place in Assam that were reinforced by these policies. In one instance, as we shall see, the absence of change may also be partially related to these policies. One would be ill advised to say that each of these changes (or lack of change) was exclusively the consequence of govern-

ment policy towards migrants. Indeed, most Assamese, including government policy makers, would deny any relationship between these policies and some of the trends described here, particularly when these trends were unwelcomed. The striking feature of the indirect effect of these policies is how difficult it is for either policy makers or citizens to perceive how policies intended to effect employment might influence the patterns of investment, or citizen loyalties, or any of a number of indirect and sometimes undesirable consequences. The "goods" of policy were visible; the "bads" were not.

Industrialists: Investment and Employment. In a society in which labor is not free to move from one locality to another, investors may consider the quality of the local labor force as an additional element in the determination of where to invest. Where capital is mobile, but labor is not, investors may be reluctant to invest in areas where there are excessive restrictions on the recruitment of manpower.

Whether these considerations have in fact slowed the pace of investment in Assam is difficult to discern. The remoteness of the region from the large urban markets, the difficulties in transportation and communication, and the lack of infrastructures that exist in some of the more developed states are all factors which affect the rate of investment. Some Marwari businessmen with investments in Assam, especially those who have experienced violence at the hands of street mobs, have said that they are reluctant to expand their investments in the state and have instead invested elsewhere in the country. Assam has not apparently succeeded in attracting any major new private investment. None of India's major industrial investors have entered the state. And in the central government there are some officials with the power to influence public sector locational decisions who view with

concern the intense nativist sentiment, or as they put it "parochial" tendencies that have prevailed in Assam.

There is no conclusive evidence that the attacks against Marwari shopkeepers, the clashes between the Assamese and the Bengali Hindus, or the protectionist labor policies of the government, have actually slowed the rate of investment in the state. Even in the absence of these developments there are few incentives for private investment in Assam. At a minimum we can say only that these developments are among the factors which investors consider as they make their locational decisions.

Indigenous Minorities: Political Loyalties and Separatism. Since independence there has been a growing disaffection of indigenous non-Assamese toward the Assamese-dominated state government. When India became independent, Assam, as we noted earlier, included a number of districts outside the Brahmaputra valley in which non-Assamese predominated. The surrounding hill districts were populated by indigenous tribal peoples who were increasingly hostile to what they saw as a policy of Assamization on the part of the state government. The prescription of Assamese as an official language of administration, the movement toward the use of Assamese as the medium in the schools and colleges, and the system of employment preferences for Assamese, all tended to strengthen sentiment within the tribal population for separation. Separation seemed feasible to the tribals since most of them live in homogeneous contiguous areas outside the valley. Moreover, since these regions border on neighboring countries -- the NEFA region to the north touches Tibet, the Garo and Khasi hills touch East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the Mizo hills border on both Burma and East Pakistan, and the Naga hills is next to Burma -- the central government feared that separatist sentiment

could be converted (by enemy arms) into secessionist movements -- as indeed it was among the Nagas.

Sentiment for political separation increased in direct proportion to the growth of Assamese nationalism. Government efforts to spread the teaching of Assamese in the schools, to increase the proportion of ethnic Assamese in the administrative services and to press for job preferences for Assamese were intended primarily to strengthen the position of the Assamese in relation to the Bengali Hindu community, but they also sharpened the cleavages between the Assamese and other indigenous peoples in the state. The result was that by 1963 the rebellious Naga tribes had successfully persuaded the central government to grant them their own state of Nagaland. The Garo, Khasi and Jaintia tribes were given autonomous status as Meghalaya which was converted into a separate state in 1972. The Mizo hills district was separated from Assam in 1971 and was constituted as the union territory of Mizoram. And the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was converted into a union territory, then into the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972.

Migrant Settlers: Public Assimilation. The indirect effect most welcomed by the Assamese has been the increasing identification of some migrant communities with the political interests of the Assamese. As we indicated earlier there has emerged a symbiotic relationship between Bengali Muslims and Assamese Hindus. Fearful of losing their land or even being repatriated, many Bengali Muslims sought political protection by allying themselves with the Assamese-dominated Congress party. This alliance is quite striking in view of the historic antagonisms between these two communities prior to 1947.

The Bengali Muslims have provided more than political support in elections and in the legislatures. They have also publicly embraced the

Assamese language. Though the law provides for the creation of primary schools with the mother tongue of the students as the medium, if requested by parents, Bengali Muslims have not objected to the establishment to Assamese medium schools in their localities. Similarly, the tribal tea plantation workers who originate from southern Bihar and Orissa, have not objected to the government's school language policy. Even the adults in both communities have asserted that they have "switched" languages. The 1961 census reported an increase in the proportion of Assamese speakers, and a decline in the proportion of Bengali speakers and tea plantation laborers who speak either tribal languages or Hindi. According to census officials, almost all of the 2.2 million Muslims of Bengali origin reported Assamese as their mother tongue. And among the estimated 1.5 million tea plantation workers and their families, only 275,000 reported a tribal language as their mother tongue.<sup>10</sup> Both groups, however, apparently continue to speak their own languages at home and within their own community. By supporting the Assamese Hindus in their anti-Bengali Hindu policies, other migrant communities, especially Bengali Muslims, have won protection from the government in the form of exemptions from potentially threatening policies.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the middle of the nineteenth until well into the twentieth century a constant stream of migration into Assam from other states transformed its social structure and political life. The Assamese found themselves

---

<sup>10</sup>The 1891 census reported 1.4 million Assamese speakers in the state. In 1961 there were 6.7 million. Had the Assamese-speaking population increased at the same rate as the Indian population as a whole, the Assamese population in 1961 would have been 2.8 million. The difference -- 3.9 million -- represents a crude figure as to how many people have switched to Assamese, if not at home, at least for public purposes.

behind in the areas of education, urbanization and industrialization, second (or third) to one or another migrant groups. As Assamese nationalism grew before independence, one of their greatest political problems was how to increase their numbers in the face of this influx. Since the Assamese could neither control the migration nor increase their own population, they looked upon boundary changes as a means of effecting their numerical ratio. Thus the redrawing of boundaries, in 1874, 1905, 1912, 1947, and in the early 1970s were critical events for the Assamese. Most crucial of all, a turning point in the political life of the Assamese, was the partition of Assam in 1947 at the time of independence, which reduced the Bengali population and thereby assured the Assamese Hindus of control over the government.

Once in political power the Assamese consolidated their control over the administrative apparatus, extended their domination of the educational system, and then sought to reach into the labor market for a larger share of employment in the modern, urban, organized sector.

Unable to close their borders and expel the migrants and their descendants as have many sovereign states, the government of Assam turned primarily to educational, language, and employment policies as a means of reversing the status of those groups, most especially the Bengali Hindus, who held a dominant position in the modern, urban, organized sectors of the economy.

In recent years the position of the Assamese has improved, but primarily in unskilled jobs and only secondarily in the clerical and managerial positions sought by the growing Assamese middle classes. To what extent these changes are more than marginally the effects of government policy is problematic for there are economic and educational changes at work that point toward a larger role of the Assamese in the urban and industrial sectors. In any event the change in proportion of jobs held by Assamese should be seen



in the context of a low rate of investment in the state, only small increases in the size of the labor market, and growing overall unemployment. Government policy has affected -- if it has had any effect on employment at all -- only the share of jobs acquired by the Assamese within the organized sector. Unless the organized sector itself expands, the opportunities for an increasingly educated and urbanized Assamese labor force are likely to remain limited.

But perhaps the most important impact of the policies described here has been not on the migration process, or even on the economic opportunities of the non-mobile local population, but rather on the process of incorporation -- of migrants, their descendants, and the non-Assamese local tribal people. The latent function of these policies has been nothing less than that of transforming social relationships among ethnic groups so as to give the hitherto numerous but economically and socially subordinate Assamese a larger role in the economic order, the occupational structure, and the social hierarchy. The older notion of a social system made up of discrete ethnic groups, each functioning with its own economic sphere, each pursuing its own distinctive cultural life, in a hierarchal social order in which the local Assamese population was by no means at the top, has given way to the notion that the Assamese should be politically, economically, culturally, and socially elevated and that other communities must modify their public behavior to accommodate themselves to the paramountcy of the Assamese. The policies described here are unmistakable signals to those who would migrate to the state, as well as to those minorities who reside in the state, that the Assamese have redefined the conditions under which they can remain. As a result some potential migrants may not come, a few may leave, some may become separatists, but most of the minorities will have little choice but to adapt themselves publicly to the new Assamese notions of integration.

Appendix 1

Firms That Are Less Than One-Third Assamese

Assam Railways and Trading Co., founded in 1881, has the lowest percent of Assamese (9%) of the twenty-eight companies. A large English-owned firm, employing 4,633 workers, it has traditionally recruited a substantial portion of its unskilled labor force from among Nepalis and Telugus (from Andhra). This pattern continues. During the year prior to the survey the firm hired 537 workers, of whom 447 were born outside of the state. Its administrative personnel are almost all non-Assamese.

Woodcraft-Mariani employs 538 workers, all but a handful of whom (19%) are migrants. The workers come primarily from East Pakistan, Bihar, West Bengal and U.P. (in that order); 36% of the workers are Hindi speakers, 35% Bengali and only 18% are Assamese. None of its workers have been hired through the employment exchanges, though, like other companies, it notifies the employment exchange of openings.

Indian Airlines Corporation is one of a handful of public firms (apart from banks) that employ few Assamese. Only 11% of its small staff of 175 are Assamese; 44% are Bengali, many of whom were born in Assam, though the largest number are from East Pakistan. There are frequent transfers of employees to Assam from other states, following a practice of centralized recruitment and transfers. More than a fifth of the staff (22%) is neither Assamese, Bengali, nor Hindi-speaking, having been recruited from all over the country.

The Sarda Plywood Factory employs most of its laborers from among the Hindi-speaking (59%) migrants from Bihar, U.P. and Rajasthan, hired at the rate of Rs 2.75 a day through labor contractors. The firm employs 190 workers and has a high turnover. The head office is located in Calcutta.

Assam Hardboards, with 359 workers, is another low-technology, traditional firm with a high turnover and a large migrant force. More than half of its employees (57%) have been in Assam less than five years: most come from Bihar or U.P. In the best paid office jobs with salaries ranging from Rs 500 to 749, only 25% were born in Assam.

Woodcraft Plywood Factory-Joypore is another small factory with 346 workers, more than half of whom are drawn from Bihar and U.P. Like many of the plywood factories, this factory also hires its workers through labor contractors. Some of its manpower needs are seasonal. Workers are paid a minimum wage of Rs 2.75 a day. The government employment exchanges are not relied upon for hiring workers. Like Sarda Plywood, its head office is in Calcutta.

The Assam Oil Company, founded in 1900, employs 4,018 workers, and has a low turnover rate compared with the companies thus far described. No contract labor is employed. However, more than half of the labor force is migrant, and of those who were born in Assam (44%), only a little more than half (56%) are Assamese. Nearly a third (31%) of the labor force in this company is Bengali, half of whom are locally born. A substantial portion of the labor force is also imported from Nepal.

India Carbon, a small, private firm employing 267 persons with its head office in Calcutta, largely employs Hindi-speaking workers from Bihar and U.P. Originally the manual laborers were engaged through labor contractors but this practice is no longer followed. The firm currently has a low labor turnover rate, even, surprisingly, among the unskilled laborers where 65% have held their jobs for five to ten years. The firm reports that none of its employees from outside Assam was recruited by direct advertisement or through the employment exchange.

The United Bank of India, a nationalized bank employing 857 workers, with its head office in Calcutta, has comparatively few migrants (30%), but most of its locally recruited labor force (61%) are Bengalis. Many of the migrants are Bengalis, born in East Pakistan, long-time residents in Assam, many of whom worked elsewhere before joining the bank. Of its 857 employees, only twenty-five were recruited through the employment exchanges.

Everest Cycles is another firm hiring unskilled manual workers from Bihar, U.P. and Rajasthan. Of its labor force 60% are migrants, almost all from the Hindi-speaking states. The Director reported that the casual and unskilled labor are recruited at the gate. "Local people do not want to stick to such jobs," he said, explaining why the unskilled workers are not Assamese.

Steelworth-Gauhati is one of three branches of this firm in Assam, the others being in Tezpur and Tinsukia. They each employ a few hundred workers (255 at Gauhati), with their unskilled workers from the Hindi-speaking states. Almost all of the Assamese-speaking workers are paid under Rs 250 a month.

The Bengali workers, many of whom have the higher paid jobs, tend to be hired locally (nineteen out of its twenty-two Bengali workers).

Associated Industries, a company with a chemical unit and a textile spinning mill, employs 717 workers in its two plants. Two-thirds of its workers (66%) are migrants. The migrants appear to be hired locally "at the gate." The firm hires workers as apprentices. They are paid Rs 1.50 per day for three months, then Rs 2 per day, and after six months, Rs 2.50. Few Assamese apply. Among the skilled workers, too, migrants predominate (72%).

The Punjab National Bank, a nationalized bank with regional headquarters in Calcutta, employs only 101 workers. Its national headquarters used to be in Lahore, but then it subsequently moved to Delhi. It is an old bank, having been founded in 1896. Its staff, mainly clerical and administrative people, are about half from Assam and half from outside. Nearly a third (32%) are Assamese, about another third (31%) are Hindi speakers, mainly from Bihar, and about a quarter (26%) are Bengalis, more than half of whom are locally born. It is interesting to note that this is the only bank with a large Hindi-speaking staff. Most of the other banks have a larger Bengali staff, and a correspondingly smaller Hindi staff (usually less than 10% Hindi mother tongue), reflecting their closer connections with Calcutta.

Assam Match Company, another lumber-based industry, also employs Hindi-speaking manual laborers, has its head office outside Assam, and has few Assamese-speaking people in the top pay scales. An unusual feature of this firm, however, is that it employs a large locally recruited Bengali labor

force. More than a third of its 1,790 workers (35%) are Bengali speakers, and the bulk of these are from Assam. The remaining Bengalis are largely migrants from East Pakistan. This firm does no labor contracting, but it has a continuous stream of workers from Bihar who constitute nearly a quarter of the work force.

Assam Cotton Mills employs migrants for two-thirds of its 750 workers. The firm also uses an apprenticeship system. New workers are paid Rs 1.54 a day for three months, with increases thereafter. Workers are recruited directly from Bihar or U.P., rather than through employment exchanges. About a third of the workers are local-born, almost all Assamese. The Bengalis who hold the higher paid clerical and administrative jobs are almost all from West Bengal. It should be noted that all four of the company directors live in Calcutta.



## Appendix 2

### Public Sector Employers of Assamese

The Oil and Natural Gas Commission, with 3,788 workers, employs 68% of its labor force locally, almost all (99%) being Assamese. But of those born in Assam, 95% are in the lowest wage categories, earning less than Rs 250 per month.

The Regional Research Laboratory, under the Council of Scientific Industrial Research, employs 59% of its small staff of 259 locally, and of these 95% are Assamese, but again almost all are in the lowest wage group. Only 18% of its executives were born in Assam.

The Fertilizer Corporation of India, an employer of 2,035, is 62% locally recruited, 88% of whom are Assamese speakers. This firm has made a special effort to hire its technical work force locally. More than half of its technical personnel (52%) are Assamese. At the managerial level, however, the staff is still predominantly non-local. Only 16% of the class 1 (managerial) jobs are held by personnel born in Assam recruited in the last year of the survey, and only 6% who have been with the firm for two to four years. Again, Assamese predominate at the lowest income positions.

The Food Corporation of India is more than half Assamese (52%) and a quarter (26%) Bengali, with a comparatively small Hindi labor force (11%). The reason for the high proportion of Bengalis and Assamese is that more than two-thirds of its labor force (68%) is recruited locally. While much of the



senior staff is recruited outside of Assam, the middle level positions are predominantly from Assam. One reason is that many of the employees of the Food Corporation are on deputation from the government of Assam. Since state government employees are recruited locally, and are more likely to be Assamese than Bengali, this is reflected in the composition of the Food Corporation. Of the locally recruited staff 97% is either Assamese (75%) or Bengali (22%).