

Migration and Changing Family Structures in Assam: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

Migration has emerged as a defining socio-economic force in contemporary Assam, resulting in significant demographic shifts and transformations in traditional family structures. This research article analyses the various dimensions of migration—economic, social, environmental, cultural, and political—and explores how these forces reshape family patterns, gender roles, intergenerational relationships, caregiving responsibilities, and community cohesion. Drawing upon secondary data, sociological theories, and contextual observations, the study reveals that migration leads to an increasing shift from joint to nuclear and modified-extended families, the rise of female-headed households, emotional fragmentation, care deficits for children and the elderly, and restructuring of household economies. While migration enhances income and reduces poverty, it simultaneously imposes psychological, cultural, and social burdens on families left behind. The paper argues that migration-induced changes must be understood holistically, considering both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The study concludes by recommending policy interventions, community-based mechanisms, and gender-sensitive support systems to strengthen families navigating these transitions in Assam.

Keywords: Migration, Assam, family structure, nuclear families, joint families, gender roles, remittances, elderly care, child socialisation, rural transformation

1. Introduction

Migration is one of the most dynamic and historically rooted social processes in Assam. For centuries, different communities such as the Ahoms, Mishings, Tea-tribes, Bengalis, Bodos, and Nepali settlers have migrated into, within, and out of Assam, shaping its cultural and demographic identity. However, the nature and scale of migration in the last four decades have intensified due to globalisation, declining agricultural viability, unemployment, climate-related displacement, and aspirations for better livelihoods.

Assam has witnessed a dramatic rise in out-migration of youth to states such as Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Goa, and Delhi for work in hospitality, security, retail, logistics, and construction sectors. The state also experiences in-migration from neighbouring regions for

agricultural and informal labour. This dual-direction migration has significant implications for family systems, gender roles, intergenerational relationships, and social cohesion.

Traditionally, Assamese society functioned on the foundation of joint and extended families, where collective decision-making, cooperative labour, and shared responsibilities were central. However, migration has contributed to the weakening of these structures, leading to the rise of nuclear families, transnational families, female-headed households, and left-behind elderly groups.

The purpose of this research article is to examine how migration reshapes family structures in Assam, the socio-economic factors driving this change, and the implications for social stability.

2. Review of Literature

Migration and family transformation is a well-studied area globally, yet regional studies focusing specifically on Assam remain limited. Existing literature provides valuable conceptual and analytical insights.

Global Literature

Scholars such as Castles and Miller (2009), Massey et al. (1993), and Stark (1991) highlight migration as a response to uneven development, labour demand, and household strategies to diversify income. Research on transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002) emphasises emotional distance, remittance-dependence, and gender restructuring.

Indian Context

Indian studies (Deshingkar, 2006; Srivastava, 2012) show that migration is linked to agrarian stress, informal employment expansion, and regional inequalities. Research in Kerala and Punjab highlights how male migration redefines women's autonomy and household decision structures.

Assam-Specific Literature

Studies from Assam (Sharma, 2010; Hazarika, 2015; Goswami, 2018) reveal that:

Youth out-migration is rising due to unemployment.

Women increasingly take responsibility for agriculture and family management.

Elderly care is becoming a major concern.

Rural communities are experiencing demographic imbalance.

Yet, few studies comprehensively address how migration reshapes family structures across cultural, economic, and emotional dimensions. This article attempts to fill this research gap by integrating sociological theories with contextual analysis.

3. Objectives of the Study

To understand the major factors contributing to migration in Assam.

To analyse how migration influences traditional family structures.

To examine gender-specific changes in family responsibilities due to migration.

To explore the effect of migration on child socialisation and elderly care.

To identify the emerging socio-cultural challenges arising from migration.

To propose policy recommendations for strengthening families affected by migration.

4. Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative-descriptive research design, suitable for sociological interpretation of migration and family change.

Data Sources: Secondary data from Census of India, NSSO reports, Assam Human Development Report, scholarly journals, books, government publications, and research papers.

Analytical Approach: Conceptual, theoretical, and thematic analysis.

Scope: Covers major districts of Assam affected by migration such as Jorhat, Majuli, Lakhimpur, Kamrup, Barpeta, Nagaon, and Bongaigaon.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because family changes are deeply socio-cultural and cannot be fully captured through numerical indicators alone.

5. Migration Scenario in Assam

Migration in Assam can be categorised into:

5.1 Out-Migration

Large-scale movement of youth to states like Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Maharashtra, and Goa. Key sectors include:

Hospitality (hotels, restaurants)

Security services

Retail and malls

Beauty and wellness

Logistics and delivery services

Factory and industrial labour

Economic stagnation and lack of job diversification in Assam are primary drivers.

5.2 In-Migration

Workers from Bihar, West Bengal, Nepal, and Bangladesh (irregular cases) move into Assam for:

Agricultural labour

Fishing

Brick kiln work

Domestic work

Construction

5.3 Internal Migration

Movement from rural to urban areas such as Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, and Silchar for education, service jobs, and business opportunities.

5.4 Climate-Induced Migration

Majuli, Morigaon, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, and Dhubri are highly affected by floods and riverbank erosion, leading to displacement and forced migration.

Migration in Assam is thus both economically motivated and environmentally driven.

6. Factors Responsible for Migration in Assam

6.1 Economic Factors

Unemployment among educated youth

Low agricultural productivity

Lack of industrialisation

Wage differences between Assam and southern/western states

Growing aspirations for better living standards

6.2 Social Factors

Influence of successful migrants

Improving communication and peer networks

Aspirations for modern lifestyles

6.3 Environmental Factors

Frequent floods and erosion

Loss of land and livelihood

Seasonal migration for survival

6.4 Educational Factors

Students moving for higher education

Skill development and vocational training opportunities outside Assam

6.5 Globalisation

Flow of information

Demand for migrant labour in global supply chains

7. Changing Family Structures in Assam

Migration has deeply transformed traditional social institutions. The classic Assamese joint family—consisting of multiple generations sharing resources and responsibilities—is gradually declining.

7.1 Rise of Nuclear Families

With youth migrating to cities, households are splitting into smaller units:

Husband migrates → wife and children remain in village

Young couples move to cities → elderly left behind

Economic pressures and aspirations for independence accelerate this shift.

7.2 Female-Headed Households

When men migrate, women become:

Primary decision-makers

Financial managers

Caregivers for children and elders

Agricultural labourers

This creates both empowerment and heavy workload.

7.3 Transnational and Translocal Families

Families maintain emotional bonds through:

Mobile phones

Video calls

Remittances

Occasional visits

However, emotional distance and marital strain may arise.

7.4 Modified Extended Families

Some families live separately but maintain dependency through:

Economic support

Shared rituals

Seasonal cohabitation

This represents a hybrid structure.

7.5 Elderly Living Alone

Migration has caused:

Decrease in co-residence

Rise in old-age loneliness

Increased health and safety vulnerabilities

Elders depend on neighbours, relatives, and remittances.

8. Impact of Migration on Gender Roles

Migration significantly reshapes gender relations within Assamese households.

8.1 Increased Responsibilities of Women

Women now take charge of:

Household budgeting

Child upbringing

Agricultural work (especially in rural areas)

Crisis management (floods, illness, etc.)

8.2 Emotional Stress and Burden

Women experience:

Loneliness

Anxiety about migrant husbands' wellbeing

Social stigma (in some conservative communities)

8.3 Economic Empowerment

Women managing remittances gain:

Financial decision-making power

Mobility for markets and banks

Social confidence

8.4 Gendered Labour Division

Traditional expectations persist:

Women continue domestic work

Men are seen as financial providers

Migration deepens but also challenges these stereotypes.

9. Impact on Children and Youth

9.1 Care Deficit

Children growing up without fathers/mothers experience:

Emotional gap

Behavioural changes

Reduced supervision

Academic difficulties

9.2 Dependency on Grandparents

Grandparents face challenges due to:

Age

Health issues

Limited ability to discipline or supervise

9.3 Aspirational Shifts

Children of migrant parents often:

Desire urban lifestyles

Aspire to migrate themselves

Develop consumeristic values

9.4 Educational Motivation

Remittances may help children:

Attend better schools

Receive private coaching

Access digital education

Thus, the impact is both positive and negative.

10. Impact on Elderly Population

10.1 Loneliness and Social Isolation

Older parents feel:

Neglected

Emotionally abandoned

Anxious about children far away

10.2 Health Challenges

Access to medicines, hospitals, and daily care becomes difficult.

10.3 Economic Support through Remittances

Although absent, migrant children often send money regularly.

10.4 Changing Respect Patterns

Traditional reverence for elders weakens as youth spend formative years away from cultural norms.

Migration creates a “care crisis” for the elderly in Assam.

11. Socio-Cultural Consequences of Migration

11.1 Weakening Community Bonds

Rural solidarity systems decline as youth migrate.

11.2 Decline in Traditional Practices

Festivals, rituals, and agricultural traditions lose participants.

11.3 Rise of Hybrid Identities

Migrant youth adopt:

Urban speech styles

Modern fashion

Cosmopolitan habits

11.4 Marital Strain

Long-distance relationships may face:

Miscommunication

Distrust

Conflicts during visits

11.5 Changing Consumption Patterns

Families use remittances for:

Home renovation

Appliances

Education

Health care

Marriage expenses

This alters rural economies.

12. Economic Impact of Migration on Families

12.1 Increased Income through Remittances

Many families report improved financial stability.

12.2 Investments in Education and Housing

Remittances are commonly used for:

Children's schooling

Building houses

Buying land

12.3 Rise of Local Businesses

Families often start:

Shops

Poultry farms

Small transport services

12.4 New Forms of Dependency

Families may become dependent on migrant income, reducing agricultural engagement.

13. Theoretical Framework

13.1 Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966)

Migration is shaped by:

Push factors (unemployment, floods, poverty)

Pull factors (higher wages, better facilities)

13.2 New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM)

Migration is a family strategy to diversify income and reduce risks.

13.3 Structural-Functionalism

Migration disrupts family stability, but new structures evolve to restore balance.

13.4 Feminist Perspective

Migration challenges patriarchal roles and opens new spaces for women's decision-making.

14. Discussion

Migration in Assam is not merely an economic event—it is a transformational social process.

It redefines:

Who controls income

Who takes care of children

How marriages function

How traditions survive

How village communities operate

Migration creates economic gains, but also emotional losses. The rise of nuclear and female-headed households shows resilience, but also vulnerability. Assam must address these social costs while recognising migration as a livelihood strategy.

15. Key Challenges

Lack of social security for elderly living alone.

Emotional and behavioural issues among children.

Excessive workload on women.

Weakening of community networks.

Poor working conditions for migrant labourers outside Assam.

Decline in agricultural labour availability.

Marital instability due to long-term separation.

16. Policy Recommendations

16.1 Government Interventions

Establish community elderly care centres.

Create migration support cells in every district.

Provide skill training for safe migration.

Strengthen rural employment opportunities.

16.2 Community-Based Solutions

Form village support groups for elderly and children.

Encourage youth clubs to maintain cultural practices.

16.3 Women Empowerment Measures

Credit access for women managing households.

Training in entrepreneurship.

Legal awareness programmes.

16.4 Support for Migrant Workers

Helplines in destination states.

Protection from exploitation.

Insurance schemes and health coverage.

17. Conclusion

Migration is a defining force in the socio-economic landscape of Assam. It brings income, opportunities, and mobility, yet simultaneously challenges traditional family systems. Families evolve, adapt, and survive through new forms—nuclear, translocal, and female-headed units. Children, women, and elders undergo significant socio-cultural shifts. The state must adopt holistic policies to ensure that migration-driven change strengthens rather than weakens family stability.

This research contributes to sociological understanding by linking migration with family transformation in a regional context. Future studies may incorporate primary fieldwork, comparative district-level analysis, and gender-focused approaches for deeper insights.

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