

# Migration in Assam: A Political Review

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## Abstract

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling permanently or temporarily in a new location. Being a worldwide phenomenon, India is also not an exception in this regard. In India's North-East it was the Britishers who encouraged movement of settlers in Assam and Bengal for numerous reasons. Subsequently, in independent India it was the 1971 war which resulted in large scale migration to escape religious prosecution and in search of better livelihood. But, the actual burden of such migration is borne by Assam and Tripura primarily leading to serious demographic transformation. This has also led to numerous conflicts between the indigenous and migrants populace. Assam movement is the finest example in this regard and the rise and fall of the regional party that was formed in that backdrop, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Lamentably, the reality is that the problem still exists. This paper maps the complexity of the issue from the historical origin till the onset of the National Register of Citizens. Further it questions the handling of the problem in the hands of the legislative and political structures.

**Keywords:** *Migration; Illegal Immigration; Politics.*

"If you want to decide the question of migration without asking your citizens against the will of the people, you are fighting a losing battle". - Viktor Orban (Hungarian Politician)

## Introduction

The question of migration is something which is common to all the countries in the contemporary situation. It is an emerging issue which cannot be overlooked by any of the nations especially, the third world countries. Migration has been taking place since time immemorial, around all parts of the globe. But with the emergence of the concept of nation-states, a non-regulated or illegal migration poses serious threat to a nation's internal security as well as transforming the demographic profile and leading to other numerous associated problems. If we need to address the prime reasons for migration, three main elements are responsible. One, the search for better conditions of living, due to security crisis in home state and also sometimes due to the natural calamities. Interestingly it is observed that the issue of migration shapes the politics of a state. In fact, India is a country, which is the finest example in this regard. The North-East region of India, especially Assam has been the victim of such politicization of the entire phenomenon from the day of its origin, till date. Numerous statistics and analysis were made at different point of time highlighting the magnitude of the menace but still the problem is not taken into serious consideration both by the central and lamentably the own state government of Assam.

## Objectives

The paper attempts to focus on the politics of migration that has been going on since a very long time in the North-East part of India especially Assam. The following are the main objectives;

- a. To map the issue from the historical origin till contemporary times.
- b. To analyze the structural and institutional failures towards resolving the crisis in Assam till date.

## Methodology

The paper is based on the historical and qualitative study of the problem. The sources of data include secondary sources like books, magazines, articles, journals, commentaries etc on the subject.

## Migration and Demographic Transformation in N.E. India

The first immediate change created just aftermath of any kind of migration is the demographic transformation of a particular region. The statistical changes in the population trends can easily be observed. A country like India, especially the North-East part has experienced this type of phenomenon very frequently. Infact, a long debate followed by severe socio-political upheaval has been taking place till date, lamentably without any concrete developments.

## Historical Account of Migration in N.E. India

The N.E. has experience migration at various periods in history. It is a region which has historical linkages from times of the Mahabharata. Ruled by successive kingdoms, the region came under the British rule after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). During the initial period from 1839 to 1873, the region was part of Bengal province. It acquired a new identity when Assam became a separate province in 1874 and was governed by a Chief Commissioner. The chaotic British policies resulted in the merger of Assam with Bengal in 1905 and it was dissolved again into Assam province in 1921 in the face of heavy opposition to the merger. Later, the Britishers also annexed the Khasi and Jaintia Kingdoms, which were merged with the state of Assam.

*Pre-Independence Migration*

The region had experienced numerous waves of immigration prior to independence. The British policies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century subsequently encouraged movement of settlers in Assam and Bengal for increasing productivity and other reasons. The growth of tea industry, which brought laborers from different parts of India like Banaras, Bihar and Chotta Nagpur. The second wave comprised labour from areas that later became East Pakistan. The worldwide increase in the jute trade resulted in jute traders looking for land holdings as Bengal province did not have significant land to increase jute production. The Assam- Bengal Railway facilitated the move of thousands of immigrants into lower Assam. The hard working Muslim workers were considered the most eligible cultivators for jute production. The third significant move comprised Nepali Migrants. An estimate of around 125, 320 persons migrated in 1951. The last was of people from the rest of India, looking for better jobs and land.

*Post-Independence Migration*

The division of British India resulted in another cycle of migration when large numbers of Hindu migrants fled from East Pakistan and settled in India. By 1961, 16.4 lakh refugees had been rehabilitated in Assam. Post 1947 experienced a heavy influx of migrants affecting the demographic composition in almost all the northeastern states, especially in Assam and Tripura. The period from 1947 to 1971 saw another massive increase in the population of almost all the northeast states. The population of the region almost doubled from 104 lakh in 1951 to 199 lakh in 1971. The population of Assam increased from 80.3 lakh registering a growth rate of 82 percent in 20 years. While, in Tripura, uncontrolled migration has reduced the indigenous ethnic tribes to minority in their own land. Now, the Bengali speaking population in Tripura comprises over 69 percent of the state's population.

The population of India has grown by 335 percent in the last 60 years, from 3, 610 lakh in 1951 to 12, 101 lakh as per the 2011 census. During the same period, the population of the northeast states grew abnormally high. The region's population was 455.8 lakh, as per the 2011 census. If the population had grown as per the national decadal growth rates since 1951, it should have been around 345 to 350 lakh in 2011. There is therefore, an increase of 100 lakh in the population, which clearly reflects the presence of migrants in North-East. It is very important to note at this juncture that in the year 2000, a report came up in the public domain which declared that approximately 15 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh were residing in India, with large numbers crossing over on a daily basis and settling in the border districts of Dhubri, Goalpara, and Karimganj in Assam. Moreover, substantiating the point, it is also interesting to note here that in the year 2016, Minister of State for Home, Kiren Rijiju informed Rajya Sabha replying a written question that as per available inputs, there are around 20 million illegal Bangladeshi migrants staying in the region.

Observing the area versus population analysis of the region it shows that Arunachal Pradesh, with 32 percent of land, has only 3 percent of the population. On the other hand, though Assam occupies only 30 percent of the land, its population is 68 percent of the total population. Tripura occupies 4 percent of the land and the population is 8 percent of the region's population. Land pressures are there in both the states and this is due to the population and is adversely affected by illegal migration.

**Migration and Assam**

Assam being the most populous state (3. 12 Crore as of 2011 Census), has witnessed a demographic shift due to the silent and invidious demographic invasion which has resulted in inter-tribal and intra-tribal insurgencies. The Muslim population has witnessed considerable growth in Assam. The state has been a victim of unchecked migration which has reduced the Hindu majority population to 65 percent from 72 percent in 1971. Muslims now constitute almost one-third of the population, a considerable increase from 24 percent in 1971. The district wise demographic profile indicates a higher Muslim population in the districts bordering Bangladesh. The Muslim population, which was 19.9 lakh in 1951, increased to 82.1 lakh in 2001. A further increase of 46 lakh person in ten years upto 2011 has taken place, though no religion based data is available from 2011 census. However, the Times of India survey of 2015 shows an increase of 03.3 percent, the highest in the country, thus, the Muslim population would be 34.2 percent in 2011 and around 35 percent in 2015. Moreover, the maximum population growth of over 20 percent compared to the 2001 census has been recorded in nine districts which have had a higher percentage of the Muslim population.

**The Unsolved Issue**

Bangladesh and India share a 4,156 km long international border, the fifth-longest land border in the world, including 263 km in Assam, 856 km in Tripura, 180 km in Mizoram, 443 km in Meghalaya, and 2,217 km in Bengal. The state of Assam which shares 263 km of border with Bangladesh out of which 143.9 km is land and 119.1 km is riverine.

The Census Report of 1911 first documented the influx of migrants into Goalpara and the districts of Lower Assam. In 1931, Mr. S.C. Mullan, ICS, Census Superintendent of Assam, reported, "Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty five years - an event, moreover, which seems lively to alter

permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1829, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization - has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali immigrants; mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal sometime before 1911 and the census report of that is the first report which makes mention of the advancing host. But, as we now know, the Bengali, immigrants censused for the first time on their char islands of Goalpara in 1921 were merely the advance guard - or rather the scouts - of a huge army following closely at their heels. By 1921 the first army corps had passed into Assam and had practically conquered the district of Goalpara. Where there is waste land thither flock the Mymensinghians. In fact, the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal into the Assam Valley during the last twenty-five years. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of Government but it is nothing of the sort; the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of large body of ants it is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home".

Post- independence, it was the year 1971, where the issue of migration reaches its height. During the Indo-Pak War or Bangladesh Liberation War atleast 10 million Bangladeshis crossed into India (especially Assam and West Bengal) illegally to seek refuge from widespread rape and genocide. There were also many indigested factsevolved during this period later on whichsubstantiated the claims.

The anti-foreigner movement or Assam Movement that started in mid- 1979-1985 was certainly one of the biggest milestones of the political history of Assam. The movement which sparked out of the political chaos and vacant Lok Sabha seat of Mangaldoi which proved the theory of growth of influx in Assam. While preparing the voter list for the election, the first flag was raised over inclusion of 45,000 doubtful citizens in the electoral roll of that constituency.

In 1983, The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal ) (IMDT) Act,came into force which was later struck down by the Supreme Court of India in 2005 in Sarbananda Sonowal v. Union of India. It described the procedures to detect illegal immigrants (from Bangladesh) and expel them from Assam. But, the hypocritical provision of this act did not satisfy the cause.

The bitter reality at this point was that questions were raised regarding the end product of the entire 6 years long movement and infamous and most barbaric incidents of independent India, Nellie massacre in 1983, against the foreigners. The Assam Accord which was at the end signed between the agitating leaders and government also went under critical scrutiny. The most shocking part was the mute acceptance of 1971 as the cut off year when 1965 was offered as the base year at least two years back by the Centre. Moreover, for rest of India, the cut-off year for any foreigner was 1951. But, after such a long effort, 25 March, 1971 was fixed as the cut-off year with continuation of the IM (DT) Act and sought to seal the India-Bangladesh border to check illegal immigration.

14 October 1985, the formation of the regional party of Assam, the AsomGana Parishad (AGP) was another remarkable event in the history of Assam. Born out of the 6 years long movement, the party was expected to address the burning problems of the region, especially the migration issue. Party leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta served as the Chief Minister of Assam for two terms, first from 1985 to 1990 and then again from 1996 to 2001. AGP was a part of the National Front government from December 1989 to November 1990. During their rule, the entire state was occupied with severe positive expectations from the party. But, lamentably, the party experienced bothrise and fall. And, this was the result of quality of leaders and their intentions.

United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), formed on 7 April 1979, was banned by government in 1990 citing it as a terrorist organization. Claiming to be the savior of Assam’s indigenous population, the organization's engaged in an armed struggle to form a socialist Assam. The existence of ULFA affected the functioning of the then politics of Assam, particularly during the time of election. ULFA seems to emerge as a deciding factor.

The 1991 Census Report made this issue more visible when patterns of abnormally high growth rate of Muslims as compared to the local Hindu population were observed in the border states of Assam and West Bengal, even after adjusting for the usual higher growth rate of Muslims observed throughout the country.

State	Population in lakhs						
	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Assam	80.3	108.4	146.3	180.4	224.2	266.4	311.7
Nagaland	02.2	03.7	05.2	07.8	12.1	19.9	19.8
Meghalaya	06.1	07.7	10.1	13.3	17.7	23.1	29.6
Tripura	06.4	11.4	15.6	20.5	27.6	31.9	36.7
Manipur	05.8	07.8	10.7	14.2	18.4	22.9	27.2
Arunachal Pradesh	--	03.4	04.7	06.3	08.6	10.9	13.8
Mizoram	01.9	02.7	03.3	04.9	06.9	08.8	10.9
Sikkim	01.3	01.6	02.1	03.2	04.1	05.4	06.1

Total	104.0	146.7	199.0	250.5	319.6	389.3	455.8
National Population	3,610.9	4,392.4	5,481.6	6,8333.3	8,464.2	10,287.4	12,101.9
%of National Population	2088	3.34	3.61	3.67	3.77	3.78	3.76
Decaded Growth *NER %	--	40.9	34.9	26.5	27.5	21.8	17.1
Deacdal Growth **ROI%	--	21.6	24.8	24.6	23.7	21.5	17.6

\*NER: North-East Region \* ROI: Rest of India

Source: Census Reports of GOI

November, 1998, another important report named “Illegal Migration into Assam” emerged that is submitted to then President of India by then Governor of Assam, S. K. Sinha. Again, few indigestive facts explained;

a. Bangladesh census records indicate a reduction of 39 lakhs Hindus between 1971 and 1981 and another 36 lakhs between 1981 and 1989. These 75 lakhs (39+36) Hindus have obviously come into India. Perhaps most of them have come into States other than Assam.

b. There were 7.5 lakh Bihari Muslims in refugee camps in Bangladesh in 1971. At the instance of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan was persuaded to accept 33,000 Bihari Muslims. There are at present only 2 lakh Bihari Muslims in refugee camps in Bangladesh. The unaccounted for 5.17 lakhs must have infiltrated into India, as there is little possibility or evidence of there having merged into Bangladesh society.

c. In 1970 the total population of East Pakistan was 7.5 crores but in 1974 it had come down to 7.14 crores. On the basis of 3.1% annual population growth rate of that period, the population in 1974 should have been 7.7 crores. The shortfall of 6 million people can be explained only by large scale migration.

In 1998, the first BJP government came into power and subsequently ordered the construction of the Indo-Bangladesh barrier to stop migrants along the border. It was also planned to enhance the already existing barrier in Assam.

2001 Census Report of India explains that Bangladeshi form the largest group of migrants in India. As per the report, there are 3, 084, 826 (3.1 million) people in India who came from Bangladesh. The state of Assam alone gives a figure of 2 million.

Year	Population (in lakhs)
1951	104
2011	455.7

Source: Census Reports of GOI

District	Area in Sq. Km	Population (in Lakhs)	Population Density (Sq. Km)	Muslim Population (percent)
Assam	78,438	311.7	397	30.9
Barpeta	2,645	16.9	742	59
Bongaigaon	2,510	07.4	676	39
Baksa	2,400	0.95	387	--
Cachar	3,786	1704	459	36
Chirang	1,468	04.8	251	--
Darrang	3,841	09.3	586	35
Dhemaji	3,237	06.8	212	02
Dhubri	2,838	19.5	896	74
Dibrugarh	3,831	13.3	392	04.5
Dima Hasao	4,888	02.1	044	02.5
Goalpara	1,824	10.1	553	54
Golaghat	3,502	10.6	305	08
Hailakandi	1,327	06.6	497	57

Jorhat	2851	10.9	383	05
Kamrup (M)	216.7	12.5	1313	--
Kamrup	4,345	15.2	489	25
Karbi Anglong	10,434	09.6	092	02
Karimganj	1809	12.3	679	52
Kokrajhar	3,129	08.8	269	20
Lakhimpur	2,277	10.4	458	16
Marigaon	1,704	09.6	617	47.5
Nagaon	2,257	07.7	733	22
Nalbari	2,257	07.7	733	22
Sibsagar	2,668	11.5	431	08
Sonitpur	5,324	19.24	370	16
Tinsukia	3,790	13.3	350	03.5
Udalguri	1,676	08.3	413	--

Source: Census Report of GOI

District	Hindu			Muslim		
	1971	1991	2001	1971	1991	2001
Assam	72.5	67.1	64.9	24.6	28.4	30.9
Barpeta	51.1	40.3	40.2	48.6	56.1	59.4
Bongaigaon	69.8	64.0	59.2	27.8	32.7	38.5
Cachar	65.4	63.4	61.4	32.5	34.5	36.1
Darrang	70.3	60.5	57.7	23.9	32.0	35.5
Dhubri	34.8	28.7	24.7	64.5	70.5	74.3
Goalpara	50.1	39.9	38.2	41.5	50.2	53.7
Hailakandi	47.5	43.7	41.1	51.4	54.8	57.6
Karimganj	55.1	50.1	46.7	44.2	49.2	52.3
Marigaon	59.4	54.6	52.2	40.4	45.3	47.6
Nagaon	59.6	51.7	47.8	39.2	47.2	51.0

Source: Census Reports of GOI

In 2015, the most dramatic process started i.e. that is seeking National Register of Citizens (NRC) application with an aim of wedding out illegal immigrants. In 2018, the first draft recognizes 1.9 crore people out of 3.29 applicants as citizens. And other names are under verification process and claims that genuine will get their names enrolled in the subsequent drafts. Interestingly, Assam is the only state in the country that prepared NRC in 1951 following the census of that year and has become the first state to get the first draft of its own updated NRC.

July 19, 2016, a bill is introduced in the Lok Sabha, the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2016 seeks to allow illegal migrants from certain minority communities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan eligible for Indian citizenship. In other words, it amends the Citizenship Act of 1955. The Bill, however, does not extend to illegal Muslim migrants. The Citizenship Amendment Bill directly contradicts the Assam Accord of 1985, which clearly states that any illegal migrants heading in from Bangladesh after March 25, 1971, would be deported. Moreover, the bill makes the entire NRC updating process meaningless. The present ruling government which came to power with the slogan of JATI, MATI, and BHETI is being bombarded from all corners in their attempt to extend support to the bill.

Observations and Discussion on the Rampant Crisis and Road Ahead: The presence of Illegal migrants into Assam from Bangladesh is a serious security threat to the identity of Assamese people. It adversely affects the social, economic and political environment of Assam, creating law and order problems where immigrants are present in large number.

There seems no viable measures have been taken by successive government to check the illegal migration, the minority population today in Assam is in a position to influence almost 55 to 60 seats in the state Legislative Assembly, thus, posing a political threat to the indigenous population. If the same trend of demographic shift continues due to collusive migration, Assam is likely to undergo a complete demographic reversal by 2061.

Despite the Supreme Court intervention, vested political interests attempts to subvert or delay the NRC to protect their respective vote-banks continue as evident from the misleading statements after the release of the first draft. Doubts also exist regarding the verification process which could be observed from the anomalies in the inclusion of names, in the post-publication of the document.

It has been clearly observed that at many occasions, the issue of migration in Assam had come to light, since independence. The Census Report of 1911, 1939 similar view was expressed by Mr. S.C. Mullan, ICS, Census Superintendent of Assam, even the six (6) years long Assam Movement, which is marked among world's greatest movement seems to wither its significance. It did not serve the purpose well. And, this is only because this issue lacks political will. Every successive government tried to drive out mileage, playing vote bank politics out of the issue, regardless of serious supreme court intervention at different times especially in 2005, 2006, and recently 2014 which expressed clearly, that the Assam Government have not addressed the issues seriously as it required and dragging their feet for years and years and still dragging, despite the apex court order.

### **Will Bangladesh accept those people?**

If somehow everything is placed on tracks and the process of deportation is started, the million dollar question in fact will be whether Bangladesh is ready to accept them in their land. It is also of utmost concern whether India ever raised the issue with Bangladesh formally in international and diplomatic levels as March 14, 2018, the Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju clarified that India has no specific pact with Bangladesh regarding repatriation of its citizens, who have illegally entered into India. Moreover, a week before the centre has also disclosed that it has no proposal to sign a fresh pact with Bangladesh concerning repatriation of the illegal migrants to the neighboring country.

Coming to the international scenario, right now, Bhutan and Bangladesh are the two important allies for India. So, any such migration issue which might develop a crack in the Indo-Bangladesh relationship. Moreover, Bangladesh is also important for India to counter China's influence in South Asia. Therefore, the issue does not seem to be settled so early. It will be quite difficult for India.

Bangladesh expressed that there is no Bangladeshi in Indian land. With such a presumption, it will be even difficult for India to persuade Bangladesh. So, where India is going to deport the illegal migrants? Moreover, Bangladesh Human Development Index (HDI) is higher than Assam's. "Currently, Bangladesh's per capita income is 70 percent more than that of Assam's. And people, never migrate to a place which is less developed or less safe than their point of origin" (Sanjoy Hazarika, Director of Centre of North East Studies and Policy Research at New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia). The only option that will be with India at this juncture is to either persuade Bangladesh to accept those people or grant them Indian citizenship. Hence, this will certainly transform the entire regions demography permanently.

This issue of migration is already pulled too long. If antidotes had been applied earlier to the disease of migration, Assam would have been saved from the brunt of illegal migration. While all the other states of India, post-independence were accelerating the development card, Assam and North East was busy with such internal socio, cultural, economic and political problems. This is one of the main reasons for backwardness of the region. And, if this continues, may be in near future, we may experience another Assam Movement against foreigner which will even deteriorate the entire scenario leading to dreadful consequences, a threat to the entire law and order of the nation.

The increase of voters in the State since 1972 did not record a steady growth, which could have been normal, but the number varied abnormally from time to time. During the period from 1972 to 1979, the State witnessed an increase of 16 lakhS voters in six years, while, from 1978 to 1983, the number decreased by four lakhs. This decrease can be attributed to the fact that during the peak of the Assam movement, some people left had left the Stat, while infiltration also apparently came down. But, during 1983 to 1985, the number of voters increased by 21 lakhs in two years, which again is very unusual. Again, during the period from 1985 to 1991, the number of voters in the State increased by 20 lakhs. However, the trend did not continue, as the number increased only three lakhs during these periods from 1991 to 1996. But, the subsequent years again witnessed a substantiate increase in the number of voters. From 1996 to 2001, the number increased by 23 lakhs and from 2001 to 2006, the number increased by 30 lakhs before the trend falling again with an increase of only seven lakh voters from 2006 to 2011. The sharp variations in the increase in the number of voters raised doubts whether foreign nationals managed to get their names included in the voter list in the State. Therefore, a thorough inquiry and of course honest political will is required in order to protect the successive indigenous generations from losing their own land and identity.

A very poor statistics shows the ineffectiveness of the entire administrative machinery in case of deportation of the Bangladeshi migrants. A total of 29, 738 foreigners have been pushed back from Assam since 1985. Meanwhile during last five years only 7, 056 illegal Bangladeshi national have been deported. The highest number of 5, 234 were deported in 2013 while in 2017 only 52 were deported.

### **In Conclusion**

The issue purely seems to be a result of a poor post-colonial design. Nobody is actually fighting for the solution of the problem but only extracting their benefits. The Government, the AGP, AASU, Congress, BJP and other political parties including all the state actors and non-state actors selling their own version of nationalism and buying the allegiance of the people of Assam. If the issue had received honest political will and effective

administrative machinery than surely it would have been resolved earlier itself. Since independence the issue is just being pulled and it is by now quite difficult to predict whether at this point it would be effectively addressed or it would again push forward to the next generation for an another debate and discussion. The future of the so called indigenous people of Assam is therefore at stake. The issue of migration from West Pakistan in India is so effectively solved but still after so many years the people and politics of Assam is digging at the issue of illegal migrants from Bangladesh and playing their own political cards. Therefore, at this point the example of Denmark can be cited where there was an entire change of government on the issue of migration. All the political parties must come forward together built a consensus and the issue needs to be brought into the political agenda of all the parties as a national security issue for greater interest of the community.

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