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## Assam Movement against Immigrants

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### Abstract:

*In Assam the process of migration began during the period of early Aryan settlement: a notable stream of migration was led by the Ahom kingdom that gradually conquered the whole of Assam. Later under the Treaty of Yandaboo when the British acquired control over Assam, colonial expansion in the region resulted in the growth of local industries like tea, coal mining, sawmills, railway lines and exploration of oil which attracted large-scale migration into the region. For the last over a hundred years, demographic patterns in North-East India have shown an extraordinary increase from two million in 1826-1981, to twenty six million in 1826- 1981. In Assam between 1901-1981, population increased from 3,290,000 persons to 19,902,820 persons, thus indicating an increase of 505.01percent, whereas growth rate in India around the same period was recorded at only 186.84 percent. As a result of rising scale of population of outsiders socio-cultural and political life in north-eastern regions and in Assam in particular has been seriously impacted. Paper is generally based on secondary resources i.e. News paper, magazine, Books, Journals, Internet sources and from other historical record etc.*

**Keyword:** Assam Movement, Migration, Insider vs Outsider

### 1. Introduction

Migration is simply known as movement of people from one place to another. In the last over a hundred years demographic patterns in North-East India have shown an extraordinary increase from two million between 1826-1981, to twenty six million between 1826-1981. In present day Assam between 1901 to 1981 population increased from 3,290,000 persons to 19,902,820 persons, thus indicating an increase of 505.01percent, whereas growth rate in India around the same period was recorded at only 186.84 percent. Correspondingly individual growth rate for other regions of north-eastern states during 1901-81 in millions was registered as below: Arunachal Pradesh: 0.02 and 0.63, Mizoram: 0.08 and 0.49, Nagaland: 0.12 and 0.77, Manipur: 0.28 and 1.14 and Meghalaya: 0.12 and 1.32, Tripura: 0.17 and 2.05. As a result of rising scale of population, of outsiders, socio, cultural and political life in these regions has been seriously impacted. (Singh, 1987)

It was during early Aryan settlement in India that the process of migration began in Assam: as the Aryan people crossed over from north Bengal plains. (Dass, 1980) But a notable stream of migration into Brahmaputra valley was of the *Ahoms*, a *Shan* tribe of Burma who gradually conquered the whole of Assam. (Singh, 2010) Several unsuccessful attempts to conquer the *Ahom* kingdom were made by the Mughals and the Burmese, but with British intervention Assam became part of 'Pan-Indian colonial empire. And formal effect to this process of incorporation and control was given under the Treaty of *Yandaboo* of 1826-negotiated between Burma and the British after a failed Burmese attempt to conquer Assam. It thus allowed colonial expansion in the region resulting in the growth of local industries like tea coal mining, sawmills, railway lines and exploration of oil which attracted large-scale immigration. Further, partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 also resulted in large-scale immigration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into Assam, a trend that continues till today. (singh, 2010) Collectively however, five major groups represent this process of migration namely

- i. Tea garden labourers,
- ii. Muslim peasant migrants from then East Bengal,
- iii. Bengali Hindus,
- iv. Nepalese migrants, and
- v. Migrants from different part of India.

### 2. Tea Garden Labourers

Notably, the British capitalists brought sizable workforce for tea plantation industry from Bihar, Chhotanagpur, Central Province (presently Madhya Pradesh) and Orissa between 1830- 1870, a process which continued till 1937. Apart from decimation of employable population as a result of internal strife and insurrection during latter part of nineteenth century, other reasons which accounted for importation of industrial workforce included lack of a class of landless peasants, lack of demand for cash and non availability of labour due to harsh conditions of work. As a result immigrant workforce of tea gardens maintained by the British

increased and numbered around 67,500 in 1876, 2,43,400 in 1891, 4,61,800 in 1911 and 7,47,200, excluding significant number of other contract migrants who took up independent agriculture outside tea gardens after their terms of contract expired. At present, migrant tea garden labourers number at 50 lakh, and completely identify themselves with indigenous population of the state and its culture.(Gogoi, 2005)

### 3. Muslim Peasant Migrants

Assam initially became part of administrative unit of Bengal Province, under colonial rule which entailed enlisting services of educated Bengalis, conversant with English language. Partition and reconstitution of Bengal region in 1907 further increased the inflow of Bengalis, particularly Muslim peasantry from East Bengal to Brahmaputra and Surma valley. Additionally, the All India Muslim League (AIML) of Dhaka which aimed to expand its base in Assam became instrumental in migration of Muslims from East Bengal. It was a cause of serious concern for Assamese people and evident in an observation made by C. S. Mullan (Census Superintendent) in his Census report of 1931 in Assam:

...probably the most important event in the province during the last 25 years- an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole feature of Assam and to destroy the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization has been the invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry immigrants mostly Muslims, from the district of East Bengal...whosoever the carcass, there the vultures will be gathered together.(Singh, 1990)

Similar concerns were voiced later during 1939-41, when the Saadullah government allotted one lakh *Bighas* (little less than an acre) of land in Assam valley for settlement of East Bengal immigrants, Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India observed:

...the chief political problem is the desire of the Muslim Ministers of Assam to increase the immigrations into uncultivated Government lands in Assam under the slogan of 'Grow more food' but what really is to 'Grow more Muslims.(Singh, 1990)

Consequently, during 1950-1961, official statistics showed a total of 2, 20,690 Pakistani immigrants in the state, and another 1, 92,339 in the following decade. After Bangladesh War of Liberation (1971) nearly 1, 00,000 immigrants stayed behind which raises the number of Bangladeshi nationals presently staying in India to 20 million. Today, Muslim immigrants in Assam constitute a crucial element in the ideology and politics of various political parties.( <http://www.assam.org/news/how-bangladeshi-muslims-wiped-assamese-out-their-own-land>.)

### 4. Bengali Hindus

In the third segment of migrants, Bengali Hindus trained in English language and British-Indian administrative systems were brought in by the British. This inflow intensified with development of new railway lines, post and telegraph offices, tea and petroleum industries, where most government jobs and professions came to be monopolized by Bengali clerks and doctors. Large scale mass migration also took place during partition when Hindus from East Pakistan crossed over to neighbouring Assam, a process which received further impetus with supportive relatives and rehabilitation schemes for refugees. Evidently, in 1958, their number figured at 4.87 lakh; in 1961 to 6.28 lakh, which increased to 2.33 millions in 1971, constituting 19.71 percent of Assam's population. Accordingly the 1991 census report showed Bengali-speaking population at 4.35 million, representing 21.67 percent population of Assam. Most migrants in this category pursued services and commercial activities in urban areas of Brahmaputra valley.(Gogoi, 2005)

### 5. Nepalese Migrants

Initial inflow of Nepalese in India occurred in Darjeeling district of Bengal, and from there, to southwest section of Sikkim in late nineteenth century. At the time of independence, Nepalese had a presence in lower hill areas around Assam which continued even after independence as many Nepali '*Gorkha*' soldiers of Indian army, settled in Assam after retirement. Availability of grazing land and growing business of milk supply in the urban economy was an incentive for *Gorkhas* in the region. Moreover as a result of Indo-Nepal treaties all Nepalis were given legal rights. Interestingly till the 1980s, Nepali cattle grazers enjoyed a status of protected groups along with scheduled tribes of tribal blocks. However, during Assam movement, immigrants from Nepal like those from Bangladesh were targeted as 'foreigners'. An index of Nepali population is given in the table below:

Year	Nepali Population in Assam	As Percentage of Total Population
1901	21,347	0.35
1911	47,654	0.67
1921	70,344	0.94
1931	88,306	1.02
1951	1,01,338	1.26
1961	2,15,213	1.98
1971	3,49,116	2.38
1991	4,32,519	1.93

Table 1: Source: census of India Reports, 1901-71; 1991.(Devi, 2007)

As per census report of 1991, there were 433,000 Nepalese in Assam comprising 1.9 percent of the population-many of them Assamese speakers. Significant decline was recorded in the percentage of Nepalese speaking people: 2.4 percent, in 1971-1991, but since the Assam movement, anti-Nepali feelings have been nonexistent.(Baruah, 1999)

## 6. Migrants from Different Parts of India

Apart from the above mentioned groups, Assam has attracted migrants from other parts of India like Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal seeking opportunities in trade, commerce construction works and white-collar jobs. Particularly notable is the role played by migrants from Mewar-Rajasthan, in the economy of Assam; who began to immigrate to Assam in pre British times. But the process of inflow intensified during British period of control and expansion when the Marwari community began to dominate trade and commerce. By the nineteenth century, it monopolized the entire commercial sector in Assam. Such a demographic increase was evident from the census report of 1891 which had only 4,877 migrants from Rajputana; the number increased to 22,000 in 1961 and further to 70,000 in 1971. Similarly, Punjabis are engaged in commercial, industrial and private sectors while most others occupy spaces as salary holders in companies or public sector undertakings or contractors or wage labourers in construction activities and predominantly found in urban areas of Assam.(Gogoi, 2005)

Demographic changes are recorded in the table given below, and since there was no census in Assam in 1981, the statistics are worked out on the basis of 1971-1991 growth rates.

S. No	Year	Assam	All India	Bangladesh
1	1901-1911	16.99	5.75	9.10
2	1911-1921	20.48	-0.31	5.40
3	1921-1931	19.91	11.00	7.06
4	1931-1941	20.40	14.22	17.60
5	1941-1951	34.98	21.51	0.10
6	1951-1961	34.95	24.80	29.83
7	1971-1981	23.80	24.66	31.83
8	1981-1991	23.80	23.85	22.00

Table 2: Relative Decadal Growth of Population

([http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal\\_migration\\_in\\_assam](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam))

S. No	Year	Assam		All India	
		Hindus	Muslims	Hindus	Muslims
1	1951-1961	33.71	38.35	20.29	25.61
2	1961-1971	37.17	30.99	23.72	30.85
3	1971-1991	41.89	77.42	48.38	55.04

Table 3: Community-Wise Growth

([http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal\\_migration\\_in\\_assam](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam).)

## 7. The Assam Movement

Notably, citizenship laws of Indian Constitution did not have any provision for settlement of continuous flow of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan even though the status of refugees of partition was accepted across India. At the same time it was not easy to monitor Indo-Bangla border to curb inflow of people or distinguish between Hindu political immigrants and Muslim economic immigrants. It is also pertinent to mention that the Indian Constitution after partition of 1947 fixed July 19, 1948 as deadline for migrants from Pakistan in India to claim citizenship rights, this date was further extended to December 31, 1950 under the Nehru-Liaquat Pact in view of continuing inflow of refugees. Though legally the Indian constitution did not make any distinction between Hindu and Muslim immigrants, yet the Immigrants Act of 1950 mentioned about Hindu refugees and illegal Muslim aliens, which was subsequently repealed. Another administrative order of Government of India in 1965 similarly stated that East Pakistani minorities-the Hindus residing in India for over six months could be granted citizenship by a simple procedure by the magistrate, which again was withdrawn in 1971. Against this background the presence of around 'six and a half million migrants and their descendents in Assam', at the turn of present century posed a serious threat to the indigenous Assamese population. Concerns about political implications of outsiders in the electoral rolls of Assam were registered by the then Chief Election Officer, S. L. Shaikhdar in 1978, who observed:

...I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states, especially in the northeastern region, wherefrom reports are coming regarding large-scale inclusions of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. In one case the population in 1971 census recorded an increase as high as 34.98percent over 1961census figures and this figure was attributed to the influx of large number of persons from foreign countries. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make that on the basis of increase of 34 .98percent between two census, the increase would likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 percent over 1961 census . In other words, a stage would be reached when that state may have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may be in all probability constitute a sizable percentage if not the majority of population in the state.(Hussain, 1993)

Anti immigrant politics was initially masked in linguistic nationalism resulting in the phenomena of linguistic agitations: practically three continuous decades after independence witnessed linguistic agitations and a more serious one in 1979 which took the form of 'anti-foreigners' movement.(Sarin, 1980) It was led by All Assam Students Union, with the support of regional parties: the Jatiyatwadi Dal, Purbachaliya Lok Parishad, Assam Yuva Samaj, Young Lawyer Forum and the Assam Sahitya Sabha and other sections of society and demanded settlement of Foreigners' issue.(Singh, 1984) Pertinent to mention that on 27 August, 1979, the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed, comprising the AASU, the Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Jatiyatwadi Dal. Thus AASU

movement gave rise to multiple trends in Assam which influenced and inspired different sections of society. (Rafiabadi, 1985) And six years of (1979-1985) Assam movement led a campaign against government policy of admitting and enfranchising 'foreigners' and demanded their expulsion and took an active lead to weed out 'foreigners' from the electoral lists.

([http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam\\_Movement](http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam_Movement).) Some of the important demands of AASU were as follows:

- i. Detection and deportation of all foreign nationals from the country.
- ii. Removal of names of foreign nationals from concerned electoral rolls before holding of any election in Assam.
- iii. Strong machinery to ensure non Inclusion of names of foreign nationals' in
- iv. Electoral rolls for future.
- v. Sealing of Indian border with neighbouring countries to check infiltration.
- vi. Necessary constitutional safeguards for people of north-eastern region for the coming-20 years to protect identity of indigenous people.
- vii. Freedom of Assam government to reject any certificate issued by district authorities of West Bengal and Tripura.
- viii. Withdrawal of delegated authority from state government to grant citizenship certificates so that foreigners detected and deported from Assam do not come back with citizenship certificate issued by other state.
- ix. Call for fresh nominations for election to Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hill after detection and deportation of foreigners.

Even as AASU mobilized broad support amongst ethnic Assamese, the immigrants felt threatened and mobilized counter support against Assam movement resulting in organization of All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU): it included both Hindus and Muslims of Bengali descent and demanded citizenship rights for all immigrants who came before 1971 as well as stopping of harassment against minorities. However, a critical issue in the anti foreigners movement was the cut off period to determine foreigners status which the AASU and AAGSP wanted to be on the basis of 1951 National Register of Citizens (NRC), for their deportation and disfranchisement. An earlier cut off period of 1951, could make detection of outsiders a complex process apart from causing serious emotional rupture and dislocation among them after a long period of settlement in the territory. Extension of the cut off year to 1961 did seem not practical either as Bangladesh was nonexistent then and Pakistan would have been hard to negotiate with. Even the selection of 1971 as the cut off year did not seem convenient for similar reasons. As a result of continuing standoff between the AASU and the union government, unrest erupted with an AASU backed embargo on export of oil, jute bamboo and plywood.

With a view to break the impasse Indian Parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act in October 1983 followed by negotiations in 1984-1985 between the government and AASU-AAGSP. After prolonged talks a new cut-off date of 'January 1966' was fixed under the historic 'Assam Accord' signed between the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and leaders of Assam Movement on August 15, 1985. As per terms of the Accord, illegal aliens, who entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971, were to be disfranchised for ten years, whereas those coming after March 1971 had to be deported. It further resolved to hold elections in December 1985 on the basis of revised electoral rolls. ([http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam\\_Movement](http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam_Movement).)

Post Accord exercise of revision of electoral rolls was criticized on the ground that a large number of names of legal citizens were removed from the rolls; final list that rolled out, had 9,806,285 voters, 689,715 fewer than electoral roll of October 1984, which had 10,496,000 voters. Consequently two new parties emerged in Assam: the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), formed by student leaders of Assam Movement, and United Minorities Front (UMF), comprising dissident Congress (I) politicians of Bengali Hindu or Muslim descent. Whereas the AGP, pursued implementation of Assam accord, the UMF demanded its cancellation. Cleavages were also evident in the poll verdict that ensued: the AGP won 64 seats: 35.17 percent of popular vote, the Congress (I) won 25 seats: 23.43 percent of the popular vote, and the UMF 17 won seats with 11.09 percent vote share .

Clearly, the UMF aimed to consolidate all 'minorities' Hindu-Muslim of Bengali descent, ethnic Assamese Muslims, Nepalis and tribals. While the AGP moderated stand by making an appeal to Assam's changed demographic reality. One of its major campaign slogans was 'Minorities are not Foreigners, AGP for all, all for AGP'. It thus captured power by broadening popular support base and making inclusive slogans rather than appealing exclusively to ethnic Assamese.

Pertinently, the Assam movement though directed against immigrants also served to strengthen measures of legal protection in their favour as seen in central jurisdiction over citizenship laws and the Illegal Migrants Act 1983, passed by Indian Parliament which made it difficult to prove who is an illegal alien in Assam. Even the AGP government which drove home to power on anti-immigrant issue failed to do anything over identification or deportation of illegal immigrants once it came to power which caused disillusionment among the Assamese. (Baruah, 1984)

A clear fallout of Anti immigrant movement of Assam was the growth of ethnic militancy in the region as it gave impetus to other groups to challenge the authority of the state: The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is an example of such outgrowth. It was founded in 1979 with the aim to restore Assam's lost independence and nursed a feeling of dissatisfaction over AGP's failure to achieve the goal of Assamese nationalism. While distancing itself from immigration issue the ULFA made an appeal to all 'Axombaxi'-people living in Assam rather than to the Assamese people and recognized anyone irrespective of his or her 'prior identity, as long as they accepted Assam as motherland, embraced and protected its culture. Significantly, the ULFA gave a call for change of name-Axom (Assam) to Axomiya (Assamese) in order to build revolutionary unity of the people who live in Assam. (Baruah, 1984) It also established transborder linkages with the then unified National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) of Myanmar for training and arms. Nearly 200 ULFA activists received training in Pakistan and Afghanistan while Defense Forces Intelligence (DFI) of Bangladesh also trained ULFA cadres in the Sylhet district. ([http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist\\_outfits/Ulfa.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/Ulfa.htm).)

A dissident's faction of the AASU and AAGSP, the ULFA within a few years emerged as a force to reckon with. At a time the AGP signed Accord with the central government and worked towards revision of electoral rolls, the ULFA denounced both the AGP and the union government and demanded secession from India. It resorted to violent methods, including bank robberies and killings while the state responded with coercive apparatus and legislations like TADA. In November 1990, after imposition of President Rule in Assam, military action under 'Operation *Bajrang*' was initiated to suppress ULFA militancy, to which the latter retaliated by killing ninety-seven people, including twenty-five Congress (I) members. (Brass, 1990)

Further, as a mark of protest against the state and parliamentary elections which were held in 1991, the ULFA captured 14 people as hostages in the state and demanded release of twenty six militants in exchange. However, breakdown of negotiations resulted in fresh state offensive with 'Operation Rhino' which again aimed at countering ULFA militancy. Attempts by state government to neutralize the ranks of ULFA resulted in a split in the organization. Representatives of the breakaway faction agreed to accept the Indian Constitution, renounce violence and seek a solution within the constitutional framework of the country and consequently Operation Rhino was suspended. (India Today, 1992) Subsequent negotiation with the moderates led to rehabilitation and reintegration incentives like Rs. 110 crore package of employment and incorporation in civilian life thus securing the defection of nearly 3,000 activists. (India Today, 1992)

In September 2005, the ULFA constituted an eleven member People's Consultative Group, to work out modalities for formal peace talks with the Central government. However, in the course of dialogue ULFA'S insistence on inclusion of the term 'Sovereignty' of Assam led to breakdown of talks, resulting in resumption of anti-insurgency operations of government against ULFA. (Singh, 2010)

Thus, experiences in Assam shows that though it was important to stop entry of illegal immigrants, the same has not been, partially because it is not easy to do so and partially because politics has encouraged infiltration for 'vote bank politics', as a result the Indo-Bangladesh borders remain open while infiltration continues to take place. (Frontline, 2010)

## 8. Conclusion

Migration in the northeast, particularly Assam due to unabated influx from Bangladesh has led to perceptible changes in the demographic pattern of the State which threaten to reduce the Assamese people to a minority in their own state. Illegal migration was the core issue behind the Assam Students Movement and also a crucial contributory factor in the outbreak of insurgency in the State. Successive governments have failed to stem this problem and today, an international dimension with security concerns has added further complexity to the issue. Concrete steps must be taken to ensure non porous borders to curb free flow of infiltration: the IMDT Act which during the last 15 years has failed to yield desired results needs a review, at the same time a new legislation is the need of the times to ensure a just, fair and practical approach to the problem. No doubt the Indian government has made efforts to mitigate the problem of migration in North-East, but in view of the growing problems deeper understanding is needed to deal with it. As an underdeveloped region with tremendous resource constraints, the North east's developmental task are enormous.

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