
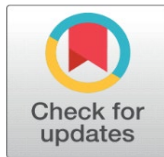
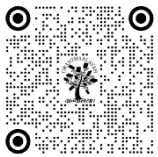


MIGRATION, DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION, AND THE IDENTITY QUESTION IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The history and politics of Assam have been deeply shaped by migration and the population changes that come with it. Right from the pre-colonial period people have been moving into Assam from other parts of India and from across the border. This movement has created both opportunities and tensions. At the same time, Assam's population has been changing naturally through processes like high birth and low death rates, better health care, and lack of education. Together, migration and demographic change have influenced how different groups think about their identity, culture, and rights. This article looks at three issues: firstly, the main reasons and periods of migration into Assam, secondly, how population of Assam has changed over time, and thirdly, how these changes are linked to identity politics, especially around language, land, and citizenship. The study is based on census and survey data, historical records, relevant articles, books and interviews with community members. It argues that the identity question in Assam cannot be solved only through laws and borders. Instead, it requires development, fair documentation, and dialogue between communities.

Keywords: Assam, Migration, Population Change, Identity, Citizenship, Assam Accord, NRC, Char Areas

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam, a state in Northeast India, sits at the foothills of the eastern Himalayas, with a unique geographical identity. It extends from 22°19' to 28°16' North Latitude and 89°42' to 96°30' East Longitude. The state covers an area of 78,438 km². According to the 2011 Census of India, the total population of Assam was 31,205,576 out of which Hindu constituted 61.47 % and Muslim constituted 34.22% and Christianity constituted 3.74%. Assam is a state where many communities live together. Ahoms, Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Deori, Mishng, Rabha, Moran, Chutia, Tiwa, Koch, Mech, Lalung, tea tribe, Bengali Hindus and Muslims, and others. The history of Assam is a history migration. From the pre-colonial period till the independence of India Assam experiences migration and settlement of migrants in her soils. Even in the post independent period immigration has not been stopped. The migration in the colonial period and particularly in first two decades of the twentieth century was most alarming which totally brought a tremendous change to the demography in Assam. Its rivers, fertile land, forests, and tea gardens have always attracted migrants. But migration has also raised concerns among local people about losing their land, culture, and political rights. It directly posed a threat to the basic

identity among the indigenous people of the State. The identity question in Assam arises when these population changes are linked to culture, language, and citizenship.

The has to four major objectives:

- 1) To understand the major migration flows into Assam and why did they happen.
- 2) To Understand how has Assam's population changed across time and regions.
- 3) To comprehend how have these changes been turned into political and identity issues.
- 4) To suggest what can be done to build peace and inclusion.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study uses data basically from secondary sources like journal, Newspapers, Books. Census and survey reports and relevant web sides, documents like Assam Accord, Assembly Debates.

Little bit primary data like interview with community leaders, teachers are also used.

2.1. MIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION

Human history is a history of migration. Migration means the movement of people from one place to another for work, land, safety, education, or family reasons. In his seminal work, "A Theory of Migration (1966)", Lee defines migration as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence (p.49). He elaborates that there are several factors which act to drive away the people from the area, or to hold the people in the area or to attract the people to it, in other words, the "push and pull" factors that explain migration between the origin and destination (p.50)¹. In Assam, migration has happened in for both pull and push factors. Migration into Assam has not been from one single source and not for a single reason. The beautiful natural environment, its fertile land, abundant uncultivated, high rainfall, forest always attracted the large number of people to be migrated and settle here. Assam was inhabited by various tribal groups such as the Austro- Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Dravidian Communities. In the Medieval period in the beginning of 13th century two important large scale migration shaped Assam history n this period. They were first, Ahom from the East in 1228 AD, established the Ahom Kingdom and ruled Assam for six hundred years until British Annexed Assam in 1826. The second was the Muslim from the west direction, especially Turko- Afgan and Mughal armies entered Assam through Bengal. Along with soldiers, traders, workers, saints entered Assam and settled here.

The event of large number migration occurred in Assam during British periods. The first type of migration happened into Assam during British period was tea plantation laborers. The British tea planters felt the shortage of laborer's when they started tea plantation in Assam. In 1931 The Royal Commission Labour in India quoted, "From the point of view of the Employer, the outstanding problem during the whole history of tea planting in Assam had been the scarcity of labour (Hazarika, 2006:30). As the local people were unwilling to work in the tea garden the British traders planned to import workers from different places of India particularly from Bengal, Orissa, chutanagpur, Central Province presently Madhya Pradesh and Madras presently Tamilnadu. The 1921 census estimated that migrants to tea plantation and their descendants numbered over 1.3 million, that is one-sixth of the total population of the province. This numbers grew to 2.9 in 1971 3.4 in 1981.² This group of people thus migrated constitute a significant number of the present population of Assam.

Another wave of migration in to Assam was Hindu Bengalis. The migration of Hindu Bengali began in the earliest days of colonial rule. Soon The Britishers started their administration in Assam they needed some modern educated, and skilled staff to run the administration. Besides their position in the colonial bureaucracy, Bengalis Hindus soon came to have a virtual monopoly in the modern profession. By early part of the 20th century, Bengali Hindus in Assam were preponderant in the medical, legal, and teaching professions as well as many other middle-class positions in the railways and in the post office.³ Bengali was the court language and the language of the new government schools of Assam for more than three decades from 1837 to 1873.

¹ Debasreeta Deb, Immigration in Assam: boon or a bane? Pratidhwani the Echo, A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

² S BARUA (1999): India against itself Assam and the Political Nationality. Oxford University Press

³ ibid

Another group of migrants who entered in to Assam was Nepalis from the neighbouring state of Nepal. The migrants from Nepal basically were ethnic Nepalis and Newar ethnic community living in Kathmandu Valley. Nepali migration in the North east and to the foothills of Southern Bhutan was mostly part of the next wave of migration in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Nepalis were allowed to settled in Assam even in excluded area where also indigenous Assamese people were not allowed. They got the facilities of protection and preservation like Tribal people in the Tribal Belt in Assam till 1980. Besides these, the Indo- Nepal friendship treaty has removed all restriction on movement of Nepalis to India. Thus, the migration of Nepalis has been being continued to Assam till now.⁴

Another migrant's community entered in to Assam during British period was Marwaris from Rajasthan. The Marwaris are basically a business community. The Marwaris is not a big group entered in to Assam but they totally dominated the trade and sector in Assam. A group of Hindi speaking workers are also visible in Assam. They are from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

The most significant event of migration in to Assam took place when Muslim peasants from East Bengal entered in to Assam. The colonial ruler in 19th century expected the landless peasants of East Bengal to move in to Assam and to be settled in the abundant wasteland in Assam spontaneously. However, it did not happen. In the census report 1891, Edward Gait express regret that economic forces alone were insufficient incentives for settlers from East Bengal to Assam. Indeed, migration from East Bengal to Assam in the 19th century was very slow. The Muslims peasants from East Bengal's migrated in to Assam mainly in the first three decades of the 20th century. The migration of Muslim peasants was inspired by the colonial ruler under scheme of grow more food. This inspiration of the colonial officers worked as pull factor for peasants' migration. And the landlessness, poverty, inflation, drought etc. worked as push factor. Anyway, the Muslim peasants migrated community constituted considerably a significant number of the population of Assam. They constituted the one-third of the total population of Assam.

Assam witnessed a large number of immigrations in the post independent periods when a huge number of refugee both Hindu and Muslims entered Assam, Meghalaya due to liberation war East Pakistan I 1971. The Muslim refugee returned after East Pakistan got independent and creation of Bangladesh. However, some of the Hindu refugee did not return and remained in Assam.

3. DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION AND QUESTION OF IDENTITY:

Migration has significantly influenced the demographic profile of Assam. Census records from the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveal a transition increase in population, particularly in Lower Assam, resulting from the settlement of Bengali Muslim peasants. For instance, the census data from 1911 and 1921 highlighted a notable rise in the Muslim population within the districts of Goalpara, Barpeta, Nagaon, and Darang. Over the four decades from 1911 to 1941, Assam's population increased by 103%, effectively more than doubled. In the subsequent 30 years from 1941 to 1971, the population of Assam increased by 118%, indicating a doubled within that period and pointing to an alarming influx of migrants. In the post-independence era, the Hindu population in urban areas expanded due to an influx of refugees from East Pakistan. Districts adjacent to East Pakistan experienced a significant increase in Hindu Bengali populations. In the years following 1971, Assam's population continued to expand at rates surpassing the national average. This growth was primarily attributed to migration, in addition to natural increases among established communities. There were concerns that native groups, such as Assamese-speaking Hindus and tribal populations, were being reduced to minority status in certain districts. According to the 2011 Census, Assam's overall population reached 31 million, with Muslims representing approximately 34% of this total, predominantly located in Lower Assam and some central districts. Tribal communities in certain regions, like the Bodos, have seen a relative decline in numbers due to both migration and loss of land.

The migration trends in Assam demonstrate both consistency and transformation: ranging from tea garden workers to waves of refugees and from seasonal laborers to those internally displaced. The demographic changes have been seen, causing some groups to feel threatened while empowering others. These developments have been central to identity politics, closely related issues of land, culture, language, religion, and citizenship. The continuous immigration and resultant demographic transformation have raised questions of identity in Assam. Here, identity politics focuses on distinguishing between insiders and outsiders. In the early 20th century, there were conflicts between Assamese and Bengali speakers. The declaration of Bengali as the official court language in 1837 generated resentment among the

⁴ Nath M.N: *Asom Rajnitit Musolman: Biswas, bastov aro sangat.*

Assamese people, which was later revoked in 1873. Language emerged as a basic symbol of identity, with Assamese speakers striving to defend their heritage against Bengali dominance. Tribal communities such as the Bodos, Misings, and Karbis perceive the influx of migrants into their ancestral lands as a threat. The issue of land encroachment is significant, as settlers from the chars frequently encroach forested or tribal territories. This situation has prompted ethnic movements and calls for autonomy, such as the Bodoland movement. As migration increased the Muslim population, political parties and organizations framed it as a “demographic thread.” This demographic thread gave rise to extreme campaigns against “illegal foreigners” and influenced electoral behavior. The Assam Movement, which took place between 1975 and 1985, marked a historic moment in identity politics. It began with protests against “illegal foreigners” listed on electoral rolls. For six years, students and civil groups demanded the detection and deportation of those who entered after 1951. The movement often turned into violence, culminating in tragic events like the Nellie massacre in 1983. The agitation concluded with the Assam Accord in 1985, which established 25 March 1971 as the cutoff date for identifying foreigners. This date continues to play a crucial role in citizenship debate and discussions in Assam. Despite the Accord, issues surrounding migration and identity did not disappear. Successive governments faced challenges in fulfilling the Accord's commitments. In certain regions, community tensions led to periodic violence, particularly in the Bodoland area and some other parts of the state. The emergence of militant groups in the 1990s introduced further complexity. At the same time internal migration within Assam has been taken place, as families which are displaced by erosion moved and resettled to urban areas or forests, leading to land disputes. This dynamic united people across different communities under the cause of defending indigenous identity. The Assam Accord of 1985 formalized 1971 as the benchmark for citizenship, making identity a legal and political issue. The recent NRC process has highlighted the strong connection between identity politics and migration. In Assam, identity politics is fundamentally linked to the question: “Who qualifies as a citizen and who are outsider?” Communities that migrated prior to 1951 consider themselves Assamese today, while later arrivals sustain ongoing suspicion. The absence of adequate documentation among the poor and illiterates further complicates this matter.

4. POLICY SUGGESTIONS

The issues of migration and demographic transition in Assam have been pivotal to its political and social profile for over a hundred years. The discussions surrounding these topics frequently evoke strong emotions, yet effective solutions necessitate thoughtful policy development that harmonizes the interests of local populations, migrants, and the broader state. This analysis suggests the following policy recommendations:

- The NRC exercise highlighted the confusion and stress that documentation can cause for disadvantaged and illiterate individuals. The Government of India and Assam should simplify processes to ensure that genuine citizens are not excluded due to insufficient paperwork.
- The Assam Accord established 24th March 1971 as the cut-off date. Any modifications (such as through CAA 2019) must be thoroughly discussed with all stakeholders to avoid renewed tensions.
- An updated digital system for recording births, deaths, and land would lessen disputes and help future generations to avoid issues related to citizenship.
- It is essential to strictly uphold the special protection of land rights in tribal areas to prevent the loss of land for tribal communities.
- Fair land distribution policies should consider the needs of both indigenous populations and settled migrants reliant on agriculture.
- Given that many migrants inhabit flood-prone chars, the government should implement programs for flood protection, housing, and sustainable agricultural practices.
- Both migrants and indigenous communities should be able to access shared educational institutions that celebrate Assamese culture and history while honoring diversity.
- Areas predominantly populated by migrants should not be overlooked; investing equally in health, infrastructure, and electricity would alleviate resentment and promote integration.
- Political parties ought to avoid framing the migration issue solely for electoral benefits. They should instead support policies that promote inclusion and coexistence.

- Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) ought to be given the authority to resolve local issues regarding land, identity, and resources, thereby decreasing reliance on state-level politics.
- Policies should be developed to enhance the presence of the Assamese language in educational institutions and government, while still allowing for the promotion of other languages.
- Improved border management with Bangladesh is crucial to stop new instances of illegal migration.
- Ongoing dialogues between India and Bangladesh regarding migration, border trade, and human trafficking are necessary to minimize cross-border tensions.
- The concept of Assamese identity ought to be broad and inclusive, accommodating all communities that have resided in Assam for generations.
- Establishing truth and reconciliation forums that involve community leaders, civil society, and scholars can aid in building trust between indigenous populations and migrants.

5. CONCLUSION

The migration and demographic transition in Assam have deeply shaped its society, politics, and identity. While migration has contributed to economic growth and cultural diversity, it has also generated tensions over land, resources, and political representation. The identity question remains central to Assam's future, as communities seek security for their language, culture, and rights. Sustainable solutions require a balanced approach protecting the interests of indigenous groups, ensuring dignity for legitimate migrants, and promoting inclusive development. Only through dialogue, fair policy, and shared responsibility can Assam move towards peace and stability, transforming the challenges of migration into an opportunity for unity and progress

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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