

# Immigration Issue in Assam : Understanding the Demographic Transformation after 1971 period

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## *Abstract*

*The issue immigration has troubled the state of Assam for decades now. It has deep impact on the socioeconomic and political life of the state. Further, it is adversely affecting the demographic structure of the state; creating law and order problem wherever they are present in sizeable number. At the very outset, the native people fear that the unchecked migration from across the border, particularly from Bangladesh will subvert their way of life and change the demographic profile of the state in the near future. This paper traces the impact of immigration on the society and politics of Assam. Based on insights from the immigration discourse of Assam, the author offers certain policy recommendations to deal with the immigrant issue in Assam.*

*Keywords: Assam, Bangladesh, Demography, Immigration, India.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The influx of immigrants from Bangladesh to Assam and the consequent visible shift in the demographic composition of the state has become a matter of serious concern. It poses a significant challenge both to the identity of the people of Assam and the national security. This threatens to reduce the people of Assam to a minority in their own region, as happened in Tripura and Sikkim. Immigration from Bangladesh to the Northeast region of India has been continuous throughout the twentieth century due to the reason of historical links, geographical and physical proximity. Better job prospects and the availability of fertile agricultural land in Assam act as a driving force or pull factor, while poverty, livelihoods, floods and other natural disasters in Bangladesh function as a push factor.

Post independent period during 1951-2011 the population growth of the state of Assam was 288.21% against 235.15% for all India. This high population growth trend tends to indicate large-scale immigration to the state of Assam. The ever-changing demographic and ethnic composition of people has had an effect on the political and economic set up long before the partition of India. Consequences of Bangladeshi immigration in Assam can be viewed in different ways but it cannot be separate from each other. First is the immense occupation of land by immigrants, the second is the conflict between indigenous tribals and immigrants due to unlawful land occupation, the third is the identity issue of the indigenous people, and the fourth is the most critical and most current is the movement against outsiders.

## II. OBJECTIVE

The broad framework of this paper revolves around the question of immigration into Assam and to examine its impact on the demographic structure of Assam in the post -1971 period.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is both descriptive and analytical in nature. For the purpose of the study data were collected merely from the secondary sources viz. several census reports of India, Census of India reports, books, journals, magazines, online data etc. The collected data were analyzed by employing the analytical method of research.

## IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Immigration is not a new phenomenon in this world. People who move from one place to another in search of work or shelter are called migrants. Immigration is the international movement of people to a destination country of which they are not natives or where they do not possess citizenship in order to settle or reside there, especially as permanent residents or naturalized citizens, or to take up employment as a migrant worker or temporarily as a foreign worker. Immigration and mobility have had a profound impact on the demography of a region like Assam. Migration can change the size of the population and also the other compositions like age, sex, language, religion etc. It brings both quantitative and qualitative changes in the socio -economic and political pattern of a region.

### *Who is an Illegal Migrant?*

An illegal migrant is a person that crosses an international border without a legitimate permit and enters another country for the intent of carrying out any illicit or anti-social operation in that country or for other economic or political reasons. According to Section 2 (b) of The Citizenship Act 1955, an illegal migrant means a foreigner who has entered into India – (i) Without a valid passport or other travel documents and such other documents or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf. (ii) With a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf but remains therein beyond the permitted period of time. Illegal migrants have been defined in Assam Accord as those who infiltrated illegally after 25th March 1971. However the stream that infiltrated illegally between 1st January, 1966 and 25th March 1971 was not to be deported and was to be given Indian Citizenship after a lapse of ten years.

## V. IMMIGRATION IN ASSAM

The problem of illegal immigration from Bangladesh into Assam and the other states of North-East India has been studied and analysed in recent years by a good number of social thinkers and from their studies the depth and magnitude of the said problem can be well understood. The process of immigration which started initially in a small way just after annexation of Assam by the British in 1826, attain vigorous momentum as soon as the British consolidated power in the entire region. In Assam over four fifth of the cultivable waste lands remained untouched by plough at the close of the last century. The local authorities encouraged immigrants into both the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys. They invited people from outside Assam and offered rent-free waste lands for a turn of years. Immediately after annexation of Assam, the British started tea cultivation as early as 1835 near Sadiya.

When the tea cultivation proved successful, several England based companies took up large scale tea plantation in upper Assam after 1835. As labor force was not available locally and the local people of Assam were unwilling to work in the tea gardens, the planters started importing indentured laborers from densely populated areas of Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Central Province, United Province and Madras.<sup>3</sup> In 1867-68 the total population of the labor force in the gardens of Assam proper was 34,433 of which, 22,800 or two thirds were imported labor. During eighties, as many as 76,041 workers were brought to the Sibsagar district alone.

The large scale migration of Bengali Muslims into Assam continued even after India's independence and proliferated with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Since, 1971, mass scale Muslim migrants from Bangladesh have illegally crossed the porous Assam-Bangladesh border. In 1979, a popular movement known as the Assam Agitation' took place against the illegal immigrants in Assam. This movement was primarily led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and soon became a mass movement with the massive participation of Assamese people. This movement ended in 1985 with the signing of the 'Assam Accord' between the AASU-AAGSP leaders and the Government of India on 15th Aug, 1985 in New Delhi. According to this historic Accord, those who came to Assam from Bangladesh on or after March 25th, 1971 is not a citizen of India, but an illegal migrant and those who came to Assam between Jan 1, 1966 and March 24th 1971 could apply for Indian Citizenship. But however even after years of signing the Assam Accord the issue of illegal Bangladeshi infiltration still exists and is a burning issue till date. Local politicians in Assam are mostly blamed by Assamese society for not doing enough about illegal migration influenced as they are by "vote bank" politics. Consequently, the first voter list discrepancy in Assam was noticed way back in 1979 when 45,000 illegal migrant names were found in the Mangaldoi Assembly election voters' list. From 1994 to 1997, 57 out of 126 constituencies in Assam showed an increase of 20 per cent in the number of voters whereas the all India average was 7.4 per cent for the same period. This rather unnatural increase in the number of voters in Assam is perhaps due to the addition of names to the voters' list through dubious means. Consequently, the illegal Bangladeshi migrants issue tends to dominate the political, economic, social, and security discourses in Assam with residents of the state expressing concern of being taken over demographically by this silent invasion.

## **VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Population growth and population density in Assam and in India, from 1971-2011***

Assam confronts a tremendous threat of unprecedented population growth. Since 1971, Assam has had the distinction of having one of the highest population growth rates of all states of India. Table 1.1 shows the demographic pattern in Assam vis-a-vis India since 1971.

Table 1.1 : Population Trend in Assam and India

Years	Population (in Lakh)		Percentage Decadal Variation		Density (Person per Sq. Km)	
	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India
1971	146	5481	+34.95	+24.80	186	177
1981	180*	6833	+23.36*	+24.66	230	230
1991	224	8463	+24.24	+23.87	286	267
2001	266	10270	+18.92	+21.54	340	325
2011	312	12102	+17.07	+17.68	397	382

*Source: (Census of India, 2011)*

It is revealed from the table 1.1 that the size of population in Assam has been increasing at a rapid rate, i.e., for 146 lakhs in 1971 to 312 lakhs in 2011. According to census report, 2011, total population of Assam stood at 312 lakhs as on 1st march, 2011. On the other hand, total population of India has also been increasing at a high rate, i.e., from 5481 lakhs in 1971 to 6833 lakhs in 1981 and then to 8463 lakhs in 1991 and again the size increase to 10270 lakhs in 2001 and then to 12102 lakhs in 2011.

**Table 1.2.: District wise percentage decadal variation in population of Assam since 1971-2011**

<b>District</b>	<b>1971-91</b>	<b>1991-01</b>	<b>2001-11</b>
Dhubri	45.65	22.97	24.44
Bongaigaon	38.77	22.09	20.59
Kokrajhar	61.96	14.49	5.21
Chirang	103.33	(-) 0.08	11.34
Baksa	73.65	12.51	10.74
Goalpara	54.12	23.03	22.64
Barpeta	40.97	19.62	21.43

Nalbari	75.78	14.21	11.99
Kamrup (M)	20.77	45.91	18.34
Kamrup	81.53	14.97	15.69
Darrang	89.77	22.18	22.19
Udalguri	43.03	10.02	9.61
Sonitpur	68.08	18.11	15.55
Lakhimpur	56.29	18.30	17.22
Dhemaji	107.50	19.45	19.97
Marigaon	50.90	21.35	23.34
Nagaon	51.26	22.26	22.00
Golaghat	58.12	14.27	12.75
Jorhat	33.10	14.69	9.31
Sivasagar	33.10	14.69	9.31
Dibrugarh	37.78	13.68	11.92
Tinsukia	47.03	19.51	15.47
Karbi Anglong	74.72	22.72	17.58
Dima Hasao	98.30	24.72	13.84
Karimganj	42.08	21.87	21.90
Hailakandi	45.94	20.89	21.45
Cachar	47.59	18.89	20.19
<b>ASSAM</b>	<b>53.26</b>	<b>18.92</b>	<b>17.07</b>

*Source: (Economic Survey, Assam, 2013-14)*

Table 1.2 indicates the district-wise decadal percentage increase in the population of Assam between 1971 to 2011. If we analyse the data then we will find that during 1971-91, the highest growth rate of population was Dhemaji (107.50%) followed by Chirang (103.33%), Dima Hasao (98.30%) etc. During the same decade, the lowest growth rate of population was Kamrup (M) (20.77%) followed by Jorhat (33.10%), Sivasagar (33.10%) etc. For the decade 1991-01, the highest growth rate of population was Kamrup (M) (45.91%) followed by Dima Hasao (24.72%) etc. During the same decade, the lowest growth rate of population was Chirang (-0.08%) followed by Udalguri (10.02%) etc. For the decade 2001-11, the highest growth rate of population was Dhubri (24.44%) followed by Mariaon (23.34%). During the same decade, the lowest growth rate of population was Kokrajhar (5.21%) followed by Jorhat (9.31%). From the above table it is observed that the percentages of population during 1971-2011 decade were found increased among the districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, Morigaon, Nagaon, Barpeta, Karimganj and Hailakandi etc.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Illegal migration from Bangladesh must be regarded as a national concern and not a regional one. The central and state governments must not neglect the seriousness of the threat posed to national security. Here, some recommendations are provided to meet the problem.

- All political parties should place on their agenda the issue of illegal migration and their perspectives on how to address it.
- The Central Government should create a National Immigration Commission to develop the National Migration Policy and the National Refugee Policy.
- There has to be immediate preventive measures to stop further illegal migration. The existing posts of the Border Security Force and the BSF water wing will be upgraded and border fencing, patrolling, and lighting should be strengthened.
- Governments, NGOs and media should initiate efforts to inform the public regarding the risks involved in illegal influx.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Immigration into Assam has in recent years gained the attention of academics from different disciplines. Massive and unchecked migration inflows from Bangladesh and other states of India into Assam have not only adversely affected demographic, economic and socio-profiles but have also been one of the major sources of social tension and ethnic instability. It is revealed from the above study that the decadal population growth and population density in Assam has risen at a faster pace as compared to the population growth rate and population density in India. The proliferation of interstate migration from other Indian states and international migration from outside India, especially neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, leads to the problem of unprecedented population growth in Assam. Currently, the most pervasive effect of large-scale immigration into Assam is the influential positions of immigrant groups in the political landscape of the state. India's government must have a strong political commitment to pursue a durable solution to the issue without further delay.

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