

IMMIGRATION AND POLITICS OF REGIONALISM: AN OVERVIEW OF FOREIGN NATIONAL ISSUE IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Assam has been experiencing continued flow of immigration since British colonial rule. It is argued by the Assamese elite that Government of India failed to protect the distinct socio-cultural, economic and political identity of the Assamese people. In spite of the historic six yearlong foreign national movement and signing of Assam Accord to protect the distinct identity of the Assamese people, immigration continues to be an influential and determining factor in Assam's politics. Though immigration started in the pre-independence period, the flow of illegal immigrants continued even after several decades of independence and it has caused a great deal of apprehension in the minds of the Assamese people regarding sustenance of their distinct socio-political identity. Actually, the problem of unabated immigration issue regionalized the politics of Assam and helped in the growth of regionalism in Assam. This paper focuses on the background of foreign national issue along with the public opinion of the indigenous Assamese on the issue. Further, it is an attempt to understand how the issue of immigration has been affecting the federalizing process between the Centre and Assam.

KEYWORDS: *Immigration, Regionalism, Federalism, Assam, Foreign National.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Immigration is not a new phenomenon in Assam. It has been experiencing huge immigrations since British colonial rule. Immigration has created a serious threat to the identity as well as the very existence of the people of Assam. Immigration also creates bitterness between the Centre and Assam in the post-colonial period. The movement on 'foreign national' issue under the leadership of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) which started in 1979 was the manifestation of such an apprehension of the Assamese people. The foreign national movement came to an end with the signing of Assam Accord in 1985. However, even after decades of signing of Assam Accord, the issue of immigration continues to be a factor of fear and anxieties in the minds of Assamese people and voices of protest against such influx have been raised by the Assamese nationalist organizations time and again. On the basis of the above facts, this paper mainly focuses on the background of foreign national issue along with special reference to the public opinion of the indigenous Assamese on the issue which agitates the mind of Assamese people. Further, it is an attempt to understand how the issue of immigration has been affecting the federalizing process between the Centre and Assam.

Immigration to Assam during Colonial rule

The flow of immigration into Assam is a continuous affair ever since the British occupation. The economic transformation of Assam during British colonial period caused an enormous

demographic shift. Colonial officials actively encouraged immigration into sparsely populated Assam located next to a densely populated region of the Indian subcontinent Bengal. British Colonial officials like Butler, A. J. Moffatt Mills, Jenkins etc. favored immigration to Assam. In 1854 A. J. Moffatt Mills did not support the granting of waste land to the natives of the province due to “super abundance of land and a deficiency of labour” (Mills 1854: 16). Like the colonial officials Assamese middle class personalities like Anandaram Dhekial Phukon, Durgadhar Sarma Baruah, Dhelaram Deodhai Phukon, Gunabhiram Barua, and Bolinarayan Bora also favoured immigration to Assam. Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukon pleaded in the early fifties of the 19th century that in order to improve the precarious condition of agriculture in Assam, the Government should import a sufficient number of men to Assam (Hussain 1993: 41). Gunabhiram Baruah even estimated that no less than a million people could easily be settled from outside on wasteland of Assam (Guha 1977: 68) [10]. Thus, due to the encouragement of British officials and support of Assamese middle class personalities immigration to Assam took place.

The demand for labour in the tea plantations was the first major reason to turn to immigrants. In the absence of a strong local labour force, Assam had to face mass-migration of labour, mostly from the Jharkhand region, to serve the interests of the British capital. Tea labourers’ massive migration transformed the demographic structure very significantly in Assam. By 1921 the population of tea-labour has become 1.3 million or one-sixth of total population of Assam (Gait 1994: 362) [7]. However, it was not only tea plantations that had to depend on immigrant labour. Other enterprises that developed during Assam’s economic transformation in the nineteenth century such as coal and oil fields and the construction of roads, buildings and railways, also attracted immigrant labour. There were, in addition, immigrants who came to Assam to occupy the new middle-class positions that required new skills, such as the knowledge of English, and to take advantage of the expanding opportunities for trading. Among them the Bengalis migrated to Assam to occupy the secondary positions in the colonial administrative set up. The Marwaris from Rajputana migrated to Assam as collaborators of the colonial state. Besides many Biharis came in search of livelihood and were prepared to do any toilsome job. On the other hand, many Nepalis came to Assam as a result of British colonial expansion and consolidation (Gohain & Bora 2007: 10).

The situation became more critical when the virgin and fertile soil of Assam has attracted a large number of immigrants from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in early parts of the 20th century. The colonization of land by settlers from East Bengal began in a big way in the second decade of the twentieth century to supply food grains and other agricultural products to the growing modern sectors in Assam. The immigrants gradually subjugated the vacant *chars* and forest lands of Assam. The immigrant agriculturists helped to increase the quantum of colonial revenue and agricultural production. P.C. Goswami observed:

One welcome result of the influx of these farm settlers is the improvement of farming practices... developed the whole agricultural system in Assam, helped to improve the health of countryside by clearing jungles and marshes, and converted the wild areas into populous agricultural region. The introduction of jute, vegetables etc. as commercial crop in Assam has largely been due to the immigrants (Goswami 1988: 29) [9].

The Census Report of 1911 mentioned for the first time the movement of immigrants from the East Bengal to Assam’s waste lands. In 1911 Goalpara district of Assam had a density of 152 persons per sq. mile whereas its neighbouring Mymensingh district of East Bengal had the density of 724 persons per sq. mile. Nowgong district had density of only 79 persons per sq. mile in 1911 (Census of India 1911; Hussain 1993: 42) [12]. Due to British policy the settlers from the thickly Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur began to flow to the *Char* lands in Goalpara district. As a result of large-scale immigration in 1911 the immigrants formed a fifth of the total population of Goalpara district. After 1911 these new settlers spread beyond Goalpara

district to other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The following decade saw dramatically increased rates of migration. The report of the 1921 census observed that in the 1911-21 decade the movement had extended far into the valley away from the river and the colonists were by then an appreciable element of the population in all the four lower and central districts. Till 1921 their number was increased to 2,58,000, with their descendents it was increased to 3,00,000 (Census of India 1921; Gohain & Bora 2007: 22). In 1921, when the population growth rate was negative for India, Assam had shown a tremendously higher growth rate. With the increase of immigrant agriculturists the commercial agricultural production of Assam was also increased (Goswami 1988: 248). Thus, in the first three decades of the twentieth century immigration to Assam took place in a vigorous manner.

After First World War the Assamese public opinion started to be increasingly agitated over the issue of immigration. The rise in the level of political consciousness of the people was reflected in the articulation of demands like the rights of the “sons of the soil” and safeguards against unchecked and unlimited immigration. The founder of Congress in Assam Chandranath Sharma voiced his concern about the threat to Assamese identity from unchecked infiltration as early as 1920 by saying “something has to be done by the Government regarding the foreign settlers. Otherwise, our national identity will disappear” (Misra 2000: 84) [16]. Assamese middle class elites like Chandranath Sarma, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Jnananath Bora, Nilamoni Phukon, Harendra Nath Barua, Dimbeswar Neog, Madhab Chandra Bezborua etc. raised their voice for the protection of Assamese nationalist interest from immigration of outsiders.

To restrict the indiscriminate occupation of immigrants, the Line System devised by J. C. Higgins, Deputy Commissioner, Nagoan in 1916 was enforced in 1920 in the districts of Nagaon and sub-division of Barpeta compelling the migrants to settle in certain demarcated belts (Bhuyan 2008: 309) [3]. While the local people of the Brahmaputra Valley voiced against immigration, the Muslim leaders of both valleys opposed the anti-immigration move and some even demanded the abolition of the Line System. Immigrant leaders like Maulana Bhasani started demanding the abolition of the Line System. Thus, over the years, Assam had been transformed from a land abundant and thinly populated State to a land scarce and thickly populated state. The rapid growth of population adversely increased the pressure on land. By the 1931 census the population movement had become even more dramatic. This inflow of immigrants had been described by Mr. C. S. Mullan, the Census Commissioner, in 1931 Census Report as:

Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty-five years, an event moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1820. 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 and, in particular from the Mymensingh...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...(Census of India 1931: 49).

The issue of immigration got a new direction with the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan. Over the years, the demographic composition of the Brahmaputra valley was changed considerably by immigration. The proportion of Muslims in the population of the Brahmaputra valley had increased from 9 percent in 1881 to 10 percent in 1931 and further to 23 percent in 1941. In 1911, Muslims constituted only 0.1 percent of the population of Barpeta sub-division; but by 1941, the percentage shot up to 49 (Guha 1977: 258) [10]. Thus, the increase of Muslim population in Assam gave the Muslim League the opportunity to demand for inclusion of Assam in Jinnah’s proposed East Pakistan. The Assamese middle class were convinced that the Muslim League Government in Assam under the leadership of Muhammad Saadulla was deliberately welcoming the Muslim element into the province with the introduction of a ‘Land Development Scheme’ and abolition of Line System (Phukon 1984:13) [19]. This fear of the Assamese elite was

further accentuated by the Saadulla government's policy of Census operation in 1941 (Census of India 1941; Baruah 1944: 62) [1]. Gopinath Bordoloi, the leader of the Congress, challenged the Census Report of 1941 and demanded its revision by an independent body. During the time of partition of the country Md. Ali Jinnah demanded the amalgamation of Assam with Pakistan on the basis of this population structure and the Indian National Congress silently conceded this demand. But due to the foresightedness and rigidity of Gopinath Bordoloi Assam was saved from being a part of Pakistan.

Immigration to Assam after Independence

The partition of the country in 1947 did not prove deterrent to immigration problem. During the pre-independent era, migrants settled down in districts of Assam bordering East Bengal, but after the partition the newcomers specially the Bengali Hindu 'refugees' from East Pakistan found no difficulty in crossing the porous border and settled down either by themselves or through their relatives unchecked and undetected to escape communal violence. Of about twenty lakh refugees who entered India during 1947-1950, undivided Assam had to give shelter to some three lakhs (Misra 2000: 111) [16]. Mahatma Gandhi regarded them as 'guests' of the country. However, the communal bitterness had already started between Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan. The riot of 1950 was dreadful event in the history of Assam. In order to reduce communal tension and to maintain peace between both the communities, the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, Sri Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Liyaquat Ali Khan had signed an agreement on April 8, 1950, which was known as 'Nehru-Liyaquat' agreement. The 1951 census has given the number of refugees in Assam as 274,455. Of these 272,075 came from East Pakistan, only 647 from West Pakistan and 1,733 from areas not specified (Census of India 1951: 337; Phukon 1985: 27). Amongst the States of India, Assam has got the largest proportion of persons born outside the State. Out of Assam's total population of 9,044,000 in 1951 as many of 1,344,000 or 14 percent were born outside Assam. But the way in which the refugee problem was dealt with by the Central Government created a considerable resentment in the minds of the Assamese elite.

They felt that the economic and cultural existence of the Assamese people was being seriously menaced by the 'so called refugee problem' created to cover up the old question of immigration. Indeed, what they pleaded was that 'Assam' must exist, and exist as the homeland of the Assamese people (The Assam Tribune 1949, June 2: Phukon 1984: 28) [19]. The Assam Government even expressed its unwillingness to continue settling refugees without limit. Therefore, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Gopinath Bordoloi in May 1949 that Assam was getting a bad name for its narrow approach to the problem and threatened to cut off financial aid to Assam if it did not agree to accept the stream of refugees from East Bengal (Misra 2000: 112) [16]. In view of the gravity of situation and pleas from the Assamese elite, the Indian Parliament passed the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, to discourage immigration from the then East Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru too conceded in the Lok Sabha that the number of refugees could not be kept in the wake of independence excitement of the country. Regarding immigration, Prime Minister Nehru in his speech in the Lok Sabha on June 27, 1962 maintained: "...much of it took place in the first five years of independence when the border was not adequately guarded... Probably it will be difficult now to deal with illegal immigrants who came before 1952. We may therefore fix 1952 as the date of enquiry" (Verghese 2004: 39) [22].

Later on the prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan Plan, 1964 known as PIP Plan also worked as a check against infiltration, but due to some opposition within the Congress Party it was scrapped by the Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha. So infiltration precipitated in a vigorous manner. This flow of refugees was also seen during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 in which more than 12 million refugees poured into India, of which one million stayed back in Assam (Franda 1982: 109) [6]. On March 19, 1972 the Indira-Mujib Treaty was signed and accordingly Bangladesh agreed to accept the immigrants who entered India after March 25, 1971. Therefore,

the immigrants who entered India prior to March 25, 1971 have become Indian. But the Government of India did not identify the immigrants to execute the treaty. Discussing the impact of immigration Myron Weiner has shown that Assam's population growing at the All-India rate between 1901 and 1971 should have been some 7.6 million in 1971, whereas in actuality it stood at 15 million, making a difference of 7.4 million which must have been filled by immigrants (Weiner 1978: 81) [23]. Thus, the illegal movement of people from Bangladesh to India continues which has been one of the most complex and hotly debated issues between the two neighbours, and also within India.

The rapid growth of population has affected the State adversely. Due to rapid increase in population, the density of population has also increased. According to the 1971 Census, the density of population in Assam per square K.M. was 186 as against the all India average of 177. In 1981, the density of Nalbari, Karimganj, Dhubri, Nagaon and Barpeta districts increased to more than 400 persons per square K.M. (Taher 1988: 10) [21]. It was estimated that the density of population in Assam, in 1981, had increased to 254 persons per square K.M. as against the national average of 221. All these demonstrated severe pressure on land and an obvious negative land-man ratio in Assam's agrarian society. Udayan Misra argued that the pressure on land and jobs could be said to be the motivating factor behind the Assam Movement (Misra 2000: 131) [16].

Apart from the adverse effects on agricultural land and employment of local people, such inflow endangers the status of the language of the indigenous people and also affects the composition of the local government through collective group voting pattern in the election. In addition to this influx, a large number of people from other parts of India have also come to Assam after independence for trade, business, industry, profession, etc. Thus, the most disturbing development in the Assam has been of population explosion. It has increased from 3.3 million in 1901 to 31.2 million in 2011 which India, the contrary as a whole from 238.4 million in 1901 to 1210.2 million in 2011. Decadal variation in the same period will also exhibit Assam had much higher rate than that of Indian average. This immigration has affected the average size of ownership of land holdings in Assam. Along with the growing pressure on cultivable land, the forest area of the State was also being continuously depleted because of encroachments by immigrants. The forest land was reduced from 38.32 per cent to 28.07 per cent between 1950 and 1973. Assam lost as much as 41.5 per cent of her forest land during 1951-1971 (Kumar 1980: 49) [13]. In fact, the growing numbers of migrants in Assam are viewed by a large section of the Assamese people as a threat to their socio-cultural, political and economic life. Linguistically, Assam is now the most diversified State in India. It may be noted that 57 percent of its population speaks Assamese, and 16 percent speaks one of the local tribal language. Bengali, the language of Bangladesh and West Bengal, is the mother-tongue of 17.4 percent of the population. Hindi, the language of migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, is spoken by 4.3 percent of the population (Weiner 1978: 81) [23]. Economically, the Assamese elite feel a sense of insecurity from the point of view of what they call 'economic exploitation' by the outsiders. Thus, the influx of a large number of foreign nationals belonging to different linguistic groups has created serious socio-political and economic problem for the indigenous population of the State.

This sentiment of the people was given a theoretical base by the vernacular press of Assam. In a series of articles published in *Nagarik* titled 'Bahiragata Samasya' written by Homen Borgohain from July 27, 1978 onwards where he maintained:

Immigration to Assam from other areas never stopped. It is a continued affair. When sometimes it takes serious form due to large-scale immigration, the Assamese people become conscious for the protection of their distinct identity. They fear that continued immigration would make the Assamese people minority and it would destroy their language and culture. Further, during the last one hundred and fifty years they never forget the memory of the early years of British rule when the colonial authorities tried to suppress Assamese and replace it with Bengali as the official

language (Translation mine) (Borgohain 1978: Gohain & Bora 2007: 6).

The Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS), a State wide literary body with an organizational network throughout the Brahmaputra Valley, in its Sualkuchi session held in the month of February, 1979 adopted a resolution against the outsiders by saying “Effective measures should be adopted to deport the immigrants who have enlarged the population of the State. Further the Central Government as well as the concerned State Governments should be obliged to return the immigrants from other parts of India” (Gohain & Bora 2007: 3). Another important theoretical base of regional sentiment was formulated by American writer Myron Weiner through his book ‘Sons of the Soil’.

Prior to the elections of 1978 to the State legislature, the regional parties like Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) and their supporters raised the issue of the outsiders in Assam and their threat to the Assamese identity. However, the concept of outsiders remained vague. The terms ‘foreigner’ and ‘outsider’ were used interchangeably. These terms not only covered non-Indians, but also that from India’s other States. The vague campaign against outsiders failed to find an adequate popular response. Later, the ASS intervened to narrow down the meaning of the term to post-1951 immigrants from foreign countries with questionable citizenship status, and this got wide acceptance amongst the other constituents of the movement. Finally, the foreigners issue came to limelight due to the statements of the Chief Election Commissioner S. L. Shakhder on the immigration issue. He observed:

I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some States, especially in the North Eastern 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 34.98% over 1961 census figures and this figures was attributed to the influx of a large number of persons from foreign countries (Hussain 1993: 102) [12].

Shakdar’s remarks, in addition to Mullan’s remarks of 1931 and Myron Weiner’s Sons of the Soil became most important cause of the foreign national movement. The Assamese people began to think that the continuous immigration from neighbouring countries to Assam and inclusion of their names in the electoral rolls would endanger their distinct identity as a nationality as well as the sovereignty of India. The issue of foreign nationals received an overwhelming response from the Assamese masses when it was linked to the bye-election of the Mangoldoi parliamentary constituency. Thus, the issue of ‘outsider’ was transformed into ‘foreigners’ in Assam.

Immigration and Assam Movement

The final stage for the Assam Movement on the foreigners’ issue was set in April 1979 when there was the need of holding parliamentary bye-election of Mangaldoi constituency due to the death of Member of Parliament Mr. Hiralal Patowary. For the election voters’ list was newly examined and in the process the names of many foreigners were found out from the voters’ list and out of 70,000 suspected voters, 45,000 voters were declared foreigners by the tribunal set up by the State Government in Mangaldoi Parliamentary constituency. The Mangoldoi issue generated a very strong fear-psychosis among a large section of the Assamese middle class. Gradually it engulfed the majority of the Assamese masses. The press and the leadership persuaded the common masses to become their ally in their movement for asserting their identity.

By mid-1979 the AASU took up the leadership position in organizing the students and the masses for a movement. As AASU had an ‘apolitical’ image who successfully led a movement to make Assamese the sole medium of instruction, together with English, for college education in Assam in 1972, it took the leadership position to lead the people against the foreign nationals in Assam. Besides, a co-ordination body known as the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed. The Asom Sahitya Sabha, the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal and the Purbanchaliya Loka

Parishad were the main constituents of the AAGSP. The AASU and AAGSP led movement was supported by the Assamese bourgeoisie, the press, the rural gentry, a large section of the middle class including some bureaucrats and police officials, the employees of the State Government, contractors, transport operators etc. AASU, in collaboration with the press, very successfully built-up public opinion among the people on foreigners' issue and transmitted the issue to the Assamese masses and prepared them for a struggle to protect their identity. They demanded postponement of the bye-election to the Mangoldoi constituency till the names of all foreign nationals were deleted from electoral rolls. They also demanded the detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. The response was total and peaceful in the Brahmaputra Valley. This was the beginning of an active phase of protest actions and mass mobilizations against foreign nationals.

The leadership continued their agitational programmes. AASU submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister on February 2, 1980 wherein they offered solution to Assam impasse. In the memorandum AASU maintained:

The main cause behind this mass upheaval in Assam was the monstrous problem of infiltration by illegal foreigners, mainly from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Nepal, and to a less extent from Bhutan and Burma. This has led to an abnormal increase in population to the tune of 40-50 lakhs, over and above the normal increase in population. That this abnormal increase in population has been due to the infiltration is an irrefutable fact, agreed to even by the most biased critics and detractors of this peaceful non-violent movement (AASU memorandum to Prime Minister 1980). Through the memorandum AASU demanded the detection and deportation of foreigners from India, removal of names of foreign nationals from electoral rolls, sealing of borders with neighboring countries, issue of identity card to Indian voters, constitutional safeguards to the indigenous people of the region, updation of National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951 etc. Thus, through the memorandum the leadership of the movement placed the foreign national issue before the whole nation. However, in a later publication the AASU estimated the number of foreign nationals in Assam at 45 lakhs (Hussain 1993: 118) [12].

From January 1980 to January 1983, the Government and the leadership had around 50 rounds of talks at various levels. In some of the talks the opposition parties also participated at the invitation of Government. All opposition parties wanted 1971 as the cut-off year to which the leadership of the movement did not agree. With the failure of talks held in December 1982 and January 1983, the Government of India was determined to hold elections in February 1983 to the State legislature. The leadership of the movement was also equally determined to stop the elections at any cost. In such a situation on February 18, 1983 over 1200 people of mostly neo-Assamese Muslim community were killed at Nellie of present Morigaon district. The Nellie massacre was followed by massacres at Chaulkhowachapori, Silapathar, and Gohpur etc. Further about 150 supporters of the movement died as a result of state violence in February 1983. Riots became endemic and law and order machinery virtually collapsed in Assam. In the 1983 elections, the Congress (I) secured absolute majority and a new ministry headed by Hiteswar Saikia was installed. The leadership of the movement boycotted the Government labelling it as 'illegal'. However, after the elections, the leadership of the movement and the Government of India realized the importance of meaningful talks. In the mean time Indira Gandhi was assassinated and Rajiv Gandhi became the new Prime Minister. Due to Punjab situation and its resultant crisis Rajiv Gandhi Government sought an immediate compromise with the leadership of the movement which paved the way to Assam Accord.

Anti-Thesis of Assam Movement

As an antithesis of foreign national movement led by AASU and AAGSP, the Bengalis and the Neo-Assamese Muslims organized themselves. The All Assam Minorities Students' Union (AAMSU) and the Citizens' Rights Preservation Committee (CRPC) came into existence to

counter the AASU led foreign national movement. They received support from a section of Bengali middle class and Muslim businessmen of Assam. The CPI (M) opposed to violence used against the minorities living in Assam though it did not oppose the demand of detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. Therefore, from the very beginning of the Assam movement, the members and sympathizers of the Left forces were attacked. Even noted social protagonists like Prof. Hiren Gohain of Gauhati University and novelist Nirupama Borgohain had to face humiliation due to their critical views on the Assam movement. The leaders of foreign national movement claimed that it was a peaceful Gandhian movement, while some saw its violent and fascist character.

The movement period witnessed the wave of academic exercises. The publications on the movement represent essentially two diametrically opposite views, one supporting the rationale, strategy and nature of the movement while the other attempted at exposing the intolerant and chauvinistic dimension of the movement which threatened the basic foundation of the composite society of Assam. In an article entitled “Cudgel of Chauvinism” (Gohain 1980 EPW, February 23: 418-20) [8] in the Economic and Political Weekly Hiren Gohain admitted that over the last few decades there had been an unusual spurt of population growth in Assam, far outstripping the all-India rate of growth. He maintained that there was no dispute that a good deal of population growth was due to the continuous immigration from Bangladesh and Nepal. Besides, in the decades before and after independence, a steady stream of ‘outsiders’ from the rest of the country had been coming to meet the growing need for various kinds of skilled labour and professionals. The situation had become explosive in the decades after independence due to ‘the law of uneven development of capitalism’. As a result popular discontent and indignation against the Centre had simmered long enough and class organizations and class politics had become more familiar. This was the long-awaited trigger that sparked off a series of incidents. Thus, Gohain questioned the general impression created by the local and national press that the foreign national movement was essentially a peaceful and democratic one. While expressing doubt on the rationality of the movement, Gohain found a class character in the movement leadership. The chauvinists initiated attack on the emerging leftist forces and tried to turn the general discontentment of the local people against the Central Government. The agitation over the presence of so called ‘foreign nationals’ had grown into massive movement, sowing seeds of deep suspicion and mistrust among different communities who had been living as peaceful neighbours for generations. Gohain made a point to unmask the non-violent character of the movement by citing incidences of violence, which bred counter-violence from the State machinery. He concluded that chauvinism had been the ‘deadly enemy’ of all radical and democratic forces in the State.

The article of Amalendu Guha entitled “Little Nationalism turned Chauvinists: Assam’s Anti-Foreigners Upsurge 1979-1980” (Guha 1980 EPW, October 1699-1720) became the central foci of the intellectual debate on the whole issue, states that the movement, undoubtedly, was related to the national question, which had the weakest link with the rest of Indian polity. He looked beyond his period and analyses the movement from a Marxian perspective and drawn certain conclusions, which provoked significant response. Guha considered the reputed concept of threat to the Assamese culture a myth than a reality. He maintained “The theory that the Assamese society is in danger is a mechanization of the middle class Assamese who has instilled in the mind of the common masses a fear psychosis to whip up a spontaneous movement.” Such an induced spontaneity of the masses based on unfounded fear turned the little Assamese nationalism to chauvinism. Further, the students, who constituted core of the movement, were not its originators. Their spontaneity was also induced by the upper class of the Assamese society who controlled the media and public opinion. The ideological and organizational roots of the movement rested in the Assamese middle class people who planned and prepared meticulously the movement in 1978 and used the students as instruments for achieving the political objectives through the upsurge. Guha

argued that the foreign national movement was national in form but chauvinist and undemocratic in manifestation. Therefore, its methods represented its intolerant and fascist face. It also presented a dubious character. It tried to show a non-violent and peaceful image when it tried to impress upon the rest of the country, but its dealing with the dissidents and minorities, both linguistic and religious, was coercive and hence violent. This had alienated the small nationalities in the State, which were likely to cause centrifugal tendencies in the composite nature of the Assamese society. In this way a movement launched towards self-determination eventually tended to become self-destructive.

On the other hand, Gail Omvedt (Omvedt 1981: EPW March 28, 589-90) [17] refused to recognize the anti-foreigner movement as 'a cudgel of chauvinism'. She maintained that to understand the events correctly, we need an analysis of the fundamental class or national characteristics of the society and the movement as well as of the objective basis for the autochthons' fear that they and their cultural-national identity may be swept by the Bengali influx. She regarded the movement as one of national self-determination by observing that the basic Assamese fear was not so much of losing jobs to Bengalis (or other 'outsiders') but of losing their land. Sanjib Baruah (Baruah 1980: EPW March 15, 543-545) [2] also refused to take note of the chauvinist and middle class character of the foreign national movement and held that it was in essence a legitimate, non-violent and peaceful rebellion of the Assamese civil society for self-expression. Baruah rationalized the agitation in terms of supposed dangers from the Bengali influx to the autochthons' cultural-national identity. He preferred to talk this assertion as Assamese sub-nationalism by avoiding the use of the term "self-determination". He stood by his position that there was genuineness in the fear of the Assamese nationality of being swamped by immigrants. Baruah did not consider the migrant Bengali community as an oppressor, but emphasized that the bitterness in the history of relations between the Assamese and the Bengalis on the language issue and the predominance of the Bengalis in the administration pointed out to the disturbing domination-subordination syndrome. Guha's article invoked sharp reaction from Udayon Misra (Misra 1980: EPW August 9, 1357-1365) [14] too. Misra refuted the argument of Guha that Assamese little nationalism was responsible for the separation of Sylhet from Assam. He argued that historically Sylhet was a part of Bengal and it was a colonial dispensation, which made it a part of Assam. While contesting the analysis of Guha on the demographic composition of the Assamese, Misra stated that there had been rise in the Bengali speaking population to the tune of 41 per cent as against 31 per cent increase in the Assamese speaking population. He maintained that the immigrant peasants occupied large tracts of fertile land in Brahmaputra Valley, thereby causing increasing pressure on land leading to social conflict. That clash of interest was not only confined to the Assamese rich peasantry and the immigrants but also involved the urban middle class and the peasant masses. Tilottama Misra (Misra 1980: EPW August 9, 1357-1365) [14] also highlighted the movement as one essentially set against extra-regional big business domination over the region's economy. Over the months the movement has been able to make the common people aware of the big business stranglehold being the cause of economic underdevelopment. According to her, in the post-colonial period Assam continues to be the 'colonial hinterland'. It reflected the domination of a small nationality by the rest of India. Thus, Misra attempted to provide the economic rationale of the popular struggle for self-determination.

Signing of Assam Accord

After six years of agitation, the anti-foreigner movement culminated in the Assam Accord, which was signed on August 15, 1985 between the movement leadership and the Union Government. The Union Home Secretary R.D. Pradhan, the President and General Secretary of AASU respectively signed the Assam Accord in presence of the Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi. The Accord provided for (1) disfranchisement of foreigners who settled down in Assam during January 1, 1966 to March 24, 1971 for a limited period of 10 years; (2) deportation of foreigners

who came to Assam after March 25, 1971 to other places; (3) regularization of pre-1966 foreign immigrants as citizens of India; and (4) holding of fresh election in Assam on the basis of revised voters' list and immediate imposition of President's rule in the state. Besides, the Government of India agreed to offer constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. In addition to this the Government of India was committed to prevent future infiltration through erection of physical barriers like walls and barbed-wire fencing, setting up a new Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), a refinery in public sector in Assam etc (Assam Accord, 1985, August 15). It put an end to a six year long struggle and turmoil in Assam.

After the accord was signed, the leadership of the movement took up the initiative to form a regional party in Assam with the help of likeminded organizations. As a result of lot of deliberations and discussions with organizations i.e. PLP, AJD etc, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional political party, was formed just 67 days before Assam Legislative Assembly election held in December, 1985. The AGP participated in the elections to the State legislature and secured absolute majority by securing 64 seats in the 126 member assembly and formed government under the leadership of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta.

The major demand of the foreign national movement was to detect the foreigners, delete their names from the electoral rolls and deport them from the country and the Accord was supposed to be a panacea in resolving the vexed problem. On Assam Accord, Parliamentarian Dinesh Goswami maintained in the Lok Sabha on February 27, 1986:

We are happy in this Accord, a solution to the Assam problem – the vexed foreign nationals issue and the other issues has been found. But we are conscious of the fact that the Accord is only one step forward. The Accord is still a mere piece of paper. The success of the Accord will depend on its implementation. Unless the Government here takes very concrete steps for implementing the Assam Accord, the entire situation in Assam may be de-stabilized again. We have noted with unhappiness that many provisions of this Accord which ought to have been implemented by now have not been implemented as yet (Kumar 2013: 252) [4].

However, the process of detection of foreign nationals in Assam has been extremely slow. The role of Central Government in the implementation of Assam was criticized by parliamentarian Dinesh Goswami in the Parliament in the following way:

The Prime Minister in a press conference has stated that except one Clause all the Clauses of the Assam Accord has been fulfilled. I will point out that none of the provisions of the Accord, where the Central Government has responsibility to fulfill, has been fulfilled. Clauses 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 of the Assam Accord deal with the detection and deletion of the names from the electoral rolls. Clause 5.5 says that for the purpose of deletion, the government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the governmental machinery. For this purpose the government of Assam suggested that 10 posts should be created. Uptil now, this post has not been fulfilled (Kumar 2013: 252) [4]. Goswami further argued that Clause 5.7 and 5.8 deals with detection and expulsion of foreigners. For this purpose the Government of Assam requested for additional staff and proposal was sent as early as October 9, 1985. However, no reply was received till March 2, 1987 in spite of repeated reminder of the Government of Assam. Thus criticizing the Central Government, Goswami maintained that Assam has already gone through the agony of a movement for six years and therefore the Prime Minister should apply his mind regarding the implementation of the Assam Accord to convince the people of Assam about the genuine desire of the government.

It is opined that the timeframe of historic Assam Accord is made meaningless by the government. The descendents of earlier immigrants have become Indian and fresh immigration is still continuing. As Bangladesh is a major source of labour, over the years, a large number of people have voluntarily migrated for both long and short-term employment to other countries. A large

number of Bangladeshis have clandestinely migrated into India, a process that continues unabated. Seeing these developments, in 1998, the then Governor of Assam, S K Sinha, studied the impact of illegal migration in Assam and maintained that political parties have been underplaying the grave importance of the immigration problem and have been viewing it as affecting only the Assamese people. In his report to the President of India, he observed: [5]

Large scale illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of this State. It poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security. Successive Governments at the Centre and in the State have not adequately met this challenge.... it is unfortunate that to this day after half-a-century of Independence; we have chosen to remain virtually oblivious to the grave danger to our national security arising from this unabated influx of illegal migrants (Sinha 1998, November 8). Thus, Sinha noticed that an issue of great concern for national security has been made into a partisan affair and a matter of vote banks. Therefore, he urged all concerned to rise above party politics and to evolve a national consensus on this all important threat facing the nation. Without the effective efforts of the Central as well as the State Governments, the unabated migration will be a continued affair. Willim Van Schandel maintained that two interests together have worked in this continuous migration, firstly, the forces that continued to compel inhabitants of Bangladesh to see a better life abroad, and secondly, the narrative of infiltration that the Indian Politicians developed in their quest for state power had the effect of upping the stakes thereby making the mediation of cross-border migration-brokers more lucrative (Schandel 2005: 233) [20].

On Assam Accord, several bipartite and tripartite talks were held between Government of India, Government of Assam and AASU. However, no effective result has been achieved till today. Amongst them a bipartite talk was held between the Government of Assam and AASU on May 2, 2005 under the chairmanship of the Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi. It was followed by a tripartite talk between the Government of India, Government of Assam and AASU on May 5, 2005 under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister Dr. Monmohan Singh. The issues in the talk were: repeal of IMDT Act, upgradation of 1951 NRC with 1971 as the cut off, Indo-Bangla Border Management, constitutional safeguard to the Assamese people, economic measures, administrative requirement etc. In the talk, the government resolved to upgrade the 1951 NRC with all the names of 1971 along with their descendants within a period of one year, to electrify the border fencing, to raise a riverine battalion etc. The Government agreed to improve Indo-Bangla fencing consisting four parts – already constructed part (153 km), the part under construction (53 km), the part on which project submitted but not yet cleared (24 km), and the project remains to be cleared (110 km). Further, the issues deliberated in the talk were flood problem of Assam, constitutional safeguard to Assamese, Ashok Paper Mill, Gas Cracker Project, Bogibeel Bridge, separate directorate at MHA to implement Assam Accord etc (Bipartite Talk between Govt. of Assam and AASU 2005, May 2). However, implementation of the decisions arrived at in the talk is quite slow. Therefore, after the completion of 25 years of Assam Accord AASU advisor Dr. Samujjal Kumar Bhattacharjee blamed the Central as well as State Governments for their failure to implement the Accord. He wrote:

In the last 25 years the Government has shown total negligence to solve the identity crisis of the indigenous people. In these years Congress (I), BJP, AGP, CPI, CPM were in power at Delhi and Dispur. But they did nothing to implement the Accord. On the other hand, the Congress (I), sitting at the helm of affairs at Delhi and Dispur for the longest period, played the role of protector of illegal Bangladeshis. The Government did nothing to execute the decisions of tripartite talk held on May 5, 2005 under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister Dr. Monmoran Singh. The AGP Government came to power to implement the Assam Accord but failed to fulfill the aspirations of the people by sitting in power for 10 years. No effort was made to provide constitutional safeguard to the indigenous Assamese people (Translation mine) (www.aasu.org.in)Dr. Bhattacharjee further

maintained 'it is a grave danger to the nation' that the Government agreed to give citizenship to the descendents of illegal foreigners till 2004 by amending the citizenship Act 3 (1) (A) (B). However, he nullified the arguments of the critics that the Assam Movement and Assam Accord did not give anything to the State. Due to the Accord, Assam has got an IIT, two central universities, a modern refinery, gas cracker project, Institute of Advanced Study and Science and Technology, Sankardev Kalashetra, Jyoti Chitran, Bogibeel Bridge over Brahmaputra etc, he maintained. But, the failure of the Government to seal the odd 272 K.M. open Indo-Bangla border helped the Bangladeshis and fundamentalist organizations to sneak into Assam to change population structure of the State. Commenting on the non-implementation of Assam Accord Col. (Retd.) Manoranjan Goswami, an Assamese intellectual, maintained "Illegal mass immigration of people from Bangladesh to India destroying the demography and culture of the original inhabitants is an under-current which may ignite spark anywhere in Assam on slightest provocation" (Goswami 2012: The Assam Tribune, Sept. 4). The Gauhati High Court also pointed out to this grave illegal migrant issue. By scrapping the IMDT Act the Supreme Court even cautioned against illegal migration as: "The presence of such a large numbers of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, which runs into millions, in fact and 'agression' on the State of Assam and has also contributed significantly in causing serious 'internal distribunces' (www.aasu.org.in). The fears and anxieties of the Assamese elite regarding immigration were further deepened with the publication of the 2011 Census Report which once again highlighted the problem of illegal immigration in Assam. According to the Census report, the decadal population growth rate in nine districts, which are allegedly dominated by illegal immigrants, is over 20 per cent. Decadal growth rate of Dhubri district bordering Bangladesh is the highest in the State with 24.40 per cent. In fact, in six of them, the growth rate has shown a jump since 2001. Of the 27 districts of Assam, eight districts registered rise in the decadal population growth rate. Interestingly, religious minority-dominated districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, and Hilakandi etc. recorded growth rates ranging from 20 percent to 24 percent during the decade 2001-2011. On the other hand, eastern Assam districts like Sivasagar, Jorhat etc. registered around 9 per cent population growth and these districts do not share any international border. [11]

Due to this unabated immigration Assamese public opinion has continued to be agitated over the issue. In an interview with The Assam Tribune, Lt. Gen. S. K. Sinha, former Governor of Assam expressed the view that "around 700 kilometres of the international border with Pakistan was fenced by the Army in just over a year, that too in tough terrain of high mountains. But the 260-odd kilometres of fencing in Assam could not be fenced in 27 years since the signing of the Assam Accord, which showed lack of political will of the Government in sealing the border to check infiltration" (The Assam Tribune, 2012, Sept. 10). Even after completion of 28 years of the Accord, with AGP Government for two terms at intervals, no substantial progress has been made in major issues like detection and deportation of foreign nationals and borders remained as porous as it was before the Assam Accord. Besides no effort has been made to provide constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect and preserve the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. A scholar argued "Due to foreign national movement, the leaders have reached their goals – the seat of power; but the masses on the other hand are left standing with the burden of accumulated underdevelopment – deceived and frustrated" (Hussain 1993: 160) [12]

Immigration, NRC and CAA in Assam

As already noted, due to continuous influx of people from Bangladesh to Assam six yearlong Assam Movement or Anti-Foreigner Movement took place in Assam. The movement culminated in the signing of a landmark Memorandum of Settlement, the Assam Accord, between the agitating parties and the Union Government on 15 August, 1985. However, the process of detection and expulsion of immigrants suffered a setback for a considerable amount of time due

lack of effort on the part both Central as well as State Government (www.aasu.org.in). The first attempt of systematically detecting foreigners was started by updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) through a Pilot Project in two circles, one in Kamrup district and another in Barpeta district in the year 2010. It had to be aborted within four weeks amidst a huge law and order problem resulted in killing four persons. After long time, the task was again finally taken up at the behest of the Supreme Court's order in the year 2013 in regards to writ petitions filed by Assam Public Works (APW), Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha and others. Since then, the Supreme Court of India had continuously monitored the process of updation of NRC.

The final NRC was published on 31 August 2019 after completion of all the statutory works as per various standard operating procedures. In the final NRC 3, 11, 21,004 persons were included leaving out 19, 06,657 persons, who shall have to approach a Foreigners' Tribunal with an appeal against non-inclusion if they so desire. However, the final NRC is yet to be notified by the Registrar General of India (RGI) under Home Ministry, as those excluded will get an opportunity to present their case before Foreigners Tribunal. Again the present Government in Assam led by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma has rejected the NRC in its current form and demanded re-verification. The delayed verification and implementation of NRC led to lot of resentment in the minds of people as well as nationalist organizations of Assam. [15]

Again the enactment of Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) by Narendra Modi led NDA government on 11 December 2019 to provide Indian citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 31 December, 2014, sparked widespread national and overseas protests. The protests first began in Assam itself and spread swiftly in other States of India (Deka, 2019). Five people were killed in the protests in Assam. The organizations like AASU, AJYCP, and KMSS etc. spearheaded agitation opposing the Act. These organizations also filed petitions in the Supreme Court challenging the Act.

The North East Students' Organisation (NESO), representing eight major students' Organisations of seven Northeastern States, declared 11 December as a Black Day for the whole Northeast. NESO stated, "This observation is to give a message to the Government of India that we are against this Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. At the same time, this is to remind our people and our posterity of yet another political injustice that the Government of India has perpetrated on the indigenous peoples of the Northeast" (The Economic Times, 12 Dec, 2020). Thus, the nationalist's organizations of Assam consider that CAA will threaten 'our culture and identity' (The Economic Times, December 12, 2020). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent announcement on repealing the three contentious farm laws has again revived CAA issue in Assam. AASU advisor Dr. Samujjal Kr. Bhattacharjee said that the farmers' persistence with protests has been a lesson for those at the forefront of the anti-CAA protests, which had to be paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He Said, "We must make the Centre scrap the CAA, which is a serious threat to the identity of the indigenous communities in the Northeast (The Hindu, Nov 22, 2021). These kinds of issues continue to dissatisfy the Assamese people and the nationalist's organizations of Assam, which certainly moulds their attitude to Indian federalism. [18]

2. CONCLUSION

Thus it can be observed that the Assamese people have been in constant fear and anxiety of being gradually dominated by the immigrants. It is argued by the Assamese elite that Government of India failed to protect the distinct socio-cultural, economic and political identity of the Assamese people. In spite of the historic six yearlong foreign national movement led by AASU and AAGSP and signing of Assam Accord to protect the distinct identity of the Assamese people, immigration continues to be an influential and determining factor in Assam's politics. Though immigration

started in the pre-independence period, the flow of illegal immigrants continued even after several decades of independence and it has caused a great deal of apprehension in the minds of the Assamese people regarding sustenance of their distinct socio-political identity.

It has been creating serious socio-political and economic problem for the indigenous population of the State. Therefore, the Assamese nationalist organizations like AASU and AJYCP etc has undertaken the task of strengthening consciousness among the people by forming public opinion on regional grounds, with the hope that their mobilization might secure their goals of safeguarding socio-economic, political and cultural significance of the State. The lack of political will of the Government has further compounded the problem of immigration which is obviously an issue that agitates the minds of the people. Actually, the problem of unabated immigration issue regionalized the politics of Assam and helped in the growth of regionalism in Assam leading to the formation of regional political party AGP and some other regional organizations which affects the Centre-Assam relations in Indian federation and, in turn influences the federalizing process of the country.

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