

Post-1971 Illegal Immigration from Bangladesh: A Demographic Changed Scenario of Assam

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Abstract- Illegal immigration from Bangladesh to Assam has been a burning problem and is adversely affecting the economy and social environment; creating law and order problem wherever they are present in sizeable number. It is due to both 'pull' and 'push' factors. Foremost among these are the economic factors (like better employment opportunities in India) while the poverty, subsistence living, ravages caused by flood and other natural calamities in Bangladesh act as push factors. The data provided in the study indicates that if necessary steps are not taken immediately, Assam, the elder sister of North-East India would lose its identity from the map of India very soon. To meet the problem, a few suggestions are forwarded in this paper.

Index Terms- Assam, Bangladesh, Demography, India, Illegal Immigration, Religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Assam, the eldest sister amongst the seven sisters of NE-India possesses a very marked individuality and is situated between $24^{\circ} 3' N$ and $28^{\circ} N$ latitudes and $89^{\circ} 51' E$ and $96^{\circ} 1' E$ meridians of longitude. The state covers an area of 78,438 sq. km i.e., 2.39 percent of the total area of India and supports a population of 26,638,407 (2001) accounting for 2.59 percent of the total population of the nation. The state is surrounded by two foreign countries namely Bhutan and Bangladesh and it is obvious that there will be some sort of influx of population across the border. At present, out of the total twenty seven districts of Assam, the districts that have been facing mostly this crucial problem are Dhuburi, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon and Nowgong of Brahmaputra valley and Karimganj and Hailakandi of Barak valley. Migration from Bangladesh into Assam is a serious and perennial problem over a century old. Only with India's independence did the migration become 'illegal'. Since then there have been dramatic changes in the scale and complexity and implications of migration.

Factors Responsible for Illegal Immigration from Bangladesh:

The implications of large-scale immigration from Bangladesh into Assam are going to be very grave. It is adversely affecting our economy and social environment; creating law and order problem wherever they are present in sizeable number. Hence, the danger due to on-going immigration is extremely known. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) S.K Sinha, the then Governor of Assam, in a report submitted to the president of India in November 1998

wrote, "As a result of population movement from Bangladesh, the specter looms large of the indigenous people of Assam being reduced to a minority in their home state. Their cultural survival will be in jeopardy, their political control will be weakened and their employment opportunities will be undermined. This silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of the geostrategically vital districts of Lower Assam (on the border with Bangladesh). The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region.....Loss of Lower Assam will sever the entire land mass of the North-East from the rest of India and the rich natural resources of the region will be lost to the nation."

Illegal immigration is due to both 'pull' and 'push' factors. Foremost among these are the economic factors (like better employment opportunities in India) while the poverty, subsistence living, ravages caused by flood and other natural calamities in Bangladesh act as push factors. The major factors responsible for illegal immigration from Bangladesh are the following:

- Religious persecution of the Hindus and Buddhist forcing them to leave their homes.
- Islamic interests encouraging uncontrolled population growth and migration keeping in view the future expansion of the territory.
- Competitive politics of vote-bank and the patronage extended to them by political parties/vested political groups in India.
- Help rendered by organized groups of touts/anti-social elements.
- Increasing pressure on land and mounting unemployment in Bangladesh due to uncontrolled steep rise in population.
- Un-natural partition based on two nation theory; difficulties of Regional Planning.
- Recurrent floods and cyclones uprooting large segments of population.
- Better economic opportunities across the border.
- Porous and easily negotiable Indo-Bangladesh border.
- Dominance of fundamentalist agenda and fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh, and
- Presence of strong pro-Bangladesh lobby in India often creates myths and confuses Indians about the gravity of the problem.

Magnitudes of Illegal Immigration:

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 (Vergese et, al., 1980; Goswami and Gogoi, 1984; Hazarika, 1992; Weiner, 1993; Taher, 1997; Saikia, 2001; Bezbarua, 2001, Bhuyan, 2001; Deka, 2010) and from their studies the depth and magnitude of the said problem can be well understood. Let us see some other important facts in this regard:

- On the basis of Indian and Bangladesh documents one estimate holds that not less than one third of Assam's 22.38 million populations are immigrants and their descendants and that 10-14 million Bangladeshi migrants were settled in India (Hazarika, 1992).
- Another estimate by a former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal holds that about 5 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh are settled in Assam (Rajeswar, 1996).
- Central Home Ministry/Intelligence Bureau sources place Assam's alien population from Bangladesh at about 4 million.
- Another study estimates that 'based on the 1951 growth rate, the state of Assam should have a population of about 15 million. It has more than 7 million extra, according to 1991 Census. The extra numbers can be accounted for by either immigrants and/or their descendants' (Hazarika, 1994).
- The large-scale immigration was actually encouraged by the congress from early sixties mainly as a means of considering its vote-banks with alien voters and they began to pretend very doggedly that there were no illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in Assam, and that all the 'so-called' Bangladeshis were, in fact, Indian citizens (Bezbarua, 2001). But now, after the *Time Magazine* report of October 21, 2002 about the activities of the ISI and the Al Qaeda in Bangladesh, and the recent reports of the Home Ministry putting the total number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh illegally living in India at about 15 million, the pseudo-secular political parties of India that had insisted on considering the religion of the illegal migrants, have become far less vocal about defending the illegal migrants or pretending that all of them are Indian citizens.
- Large-scale illegal infiltration has already reduced the indigenous people of Tripura into minority and is fast changing the demographic composition of more and more areas of Assam in their favour and is also aggravating the unemployment problem and tensions and conflicts over possession of unchanging land area, resulting in many agitation and law and order situations (Changkakoti, 2002).

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To study the scenario of the post -1971 illegal immigration from Bangladesh to Assam and its impact

on the demographic structure more particularly on the religious composition of population of Assam.

2. To suggest some remedial measures to meet the problem.

Methodology:

For the present study data were collected merely from the secondary sources viz. several census reports of India during 1971-2001, books, journals, magazines, internet etc. The collected data were analyzed by employing the analytical method of research.

Delimitations of the Study:

1. The study was restricted to mainly the post -1971 illegal immigration from Bangladesh to Assam.
2. Regarding the sample for the study only the secondary data collected from the various Census reports of India from 1971 to 2001 were counted.
3. The impact of illegal immigration from Bangladesh was studied on the demographic structure more particularly on the religious composition of population of Assam.

Results and Discussion:

After independence of India, the affect of migration to Assam was the highest. The rate of migration may be divided broadly into two parts, pre-1971 and post-1971. Post-1971 period refers to the trend of migration after the creation of Bangladesh. The Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunals) Act 1983 (IMDT) that came into force in Assam for detection of illegal migrants points out the illegal migrants is one who:

- Has entered into India on or after 25th day of March, 1971;
- Is a foreigner;
- Has entered into India without being in possession of a valid passport or other travel document or any other lawful authority in that behalf. (IMDT, 1983)

After the emergence of Bangladesh the immigration pattern has undergone changes. Census could not be conducted in Assam in 1981 due to disturbed condition prevailing at that time. So, our study for post-1971 period is restricted to the entire thirty year period i.e., 1971- 2001. Census was, however, conducted in the other North-Eastern states in 1981.

Table-I: District wise percentage decadal variation in population since 1971-2001

Districts	1971-1991	1991-2001	Average Decadal Growth
Dhubri	56.57	23.42	26.66
Kokrajhar	76.78	12.05	29.61
Bongaigaon	64.64	12.23	25.62
Goalpara	54.12	23.07	25.73
Barpeta	43.02	18.53	20.51
Nalbari	49.27	11.98	20.41
Kamrup	65.72	25.75	30.49
Darrang	55.63	15.79	23.80
Sonitpur	57.14	17.80	21.64
Lakhimpur	56.29	18.34	24.87
Dhemaji	107.50	18.93	42.14
Morigaon	50.90	21.29	24.06
Nagaon	51.26	22.30	24.52

Golaghat	58.12	14.21	24.00
Jorhat	33.10	15.84	16.13
Sivasagar	38.76	15.95	18.23
Dibrugarh	37.78	12.43	16.60
Tinsukia	47.03	19.52	22.18
Karbi Anglong	74.72	22.57	32.30
N.C. Hills	98.30	23.47	37.30
Karimganj	42.08	21.35	21.14
Hailakandi	45.94	20.92	22.28
Cachar	47.59	18.66	22..00

From the above table it is observed that the percentages of population during 1991-2001 decade were found increased among the districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, Morigaon, Nagaon, Barpeta, Karimganj and Hailakandi except the two hilly districts namely Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills and Kamrup (city).

Table-II: Growth Rate of population of three major religious communities, their growth rates and percentages to total population during 1971-2001.

Religious community	Total Population			Percentage to total population			Growth Rate	
	1971	1991	2001	1971	1991	2001	'71-91	'91-2001
Hindu	10,604,618	15,047,293	17,296,455	72.51	67.13	64.89	41.89	14.94
Muslim	3,592,124	6,373,204	8,240,611	24.56	18.43	30.92	77.42	29.30
Christian	381,010	744,367	986,589	2.61	3.32	3.70	95.37	32.54
Others	47,400	247,458	97,505	0.32	1.12	0.36	426.28	-60.91
Assam	14,625,152	22,414,322	26,655,528	100	100	100	53.26	18.92

The data presented in the above table shows the high growth rate among the Christians during the periods of 1971-1991 (95.37%) and 1991-2001 (32.54%), which was largely due to conversion from other religions, mostly from Hindus. On the other hand, if we compare the growth rates between the two major religious communities of Assam i.e., Hindu and Muslim, we see that their growth rates were decreased in the period of 1991-2001 i.e., 14.94% and 29.30% respectively as compared to the periods of 1971-1991 (41.89% and 77.42% respectively). But, it is observed that the growth rates were found greater among Muslim community than that of the Hindu community in all the periods. Here, a question may be aroused as where is the illegal immigrants? For answering this, let us take the data from 1971 to 1991 and analyze it:-

If the figures of all the non-Muslim communities are combined together, the growth rate comes to 45.39 per cent for the twenty year period. The decadal growth rate is, therefore, calculated at about 20.38 percent. The natural growth rate of Assam in 1991 for all the religious groups combined is estimated as 19.4 per thousand. If the natural growth rate for the non-Muslims is slightly lower than 19.4, say 19 per thousand, then the excess of about four lakhs non-Muslims may be due to migration for the entire twenty years from 1971 to 1991. If the decadal natural growth rate for the Muslims during this period is considered to be 20.5 per cent, then the growth rate for this period is calculated at 45.2 per cent. In that case, the excess of

about 11.5 lakhs may be considered as illegal immigrants of Muslims, mostly from Bangladesh. It may be mentioned that only a few entered Assam with passport during this period.(Bhuyan, 2001).

Table-III: District wise population percentages of Hindu, Muslims and other religions in Assam during 1991-2001

Districts	1991			2001		
	Hindu	Muslim	Others	Hindu	Muslim	Others
Dhubri	28.73	70.45	.82	24.74	74.29	.97
Kokrajhar	66.38	19.33	14.29	65.60	20.36	14.04
Bongaigaon	64.00	32.74	3.26	59.18	38.52	2.3
Goalpara	39.89	50.18	9.93	38.22	53.71	8.07
Barpeta	40.26	56.07	3.67	40.19	59.37	.44
Nalbari	77.48	19.94	2.58	76.05	22.10	1.85
Kamrup	74.32	23.38	2.3	72.80	24.78	2.42
Darrang	60.54	31.98	7.48	57.74	35.54	6.72
Sonitpur	80.20	13.33	6.47	76.58	15.94	7.48
Lakhimpur	79.70	14.50	5.8	79.06	16.14	4.8
Dhemaji	93.87	1.49	4.64	95.95	1.84	2.21
Morigaon	54.56	45.31	.13	52.21	47.59	.2
Nagaon	51.73	47.19	1.08	47.80	51.00	1.2
Golaghat	86.12	7.11	6.77	85.94	7.91	6.15
Jorhat	93.59	4.32	2.09	92.86	4.77	2.37

Sivasagar	89.26	7.63	3.11	88.21	8.15	3.64
Dibrugarh	91.30	4.49	4.21	90.79	4.50	4.71
Tinsukia	90.18	3.13	6.69	89.48	3.48	8.3
Karbianglong	84.82	1.57	13.61	82.40	2.22	15.38
N.C. Hills	72.92	2.21	24.87	69.91	2.48	27.61
Karimganj	50.15	49.17	.68	46.70	52.30	1.00
Hailakandi	43.71	54.79	1.5	41.11	57.63	1.26
Cachar	63.42	34.49	2.09	61.37	36.13	2.5

From the Table-III it is clear that during 1991-2001 periods, the percentages of Hindu population were decreased in each and every district of Assam whereas the population percentages of Muslim community were increased in every district. This picture indicates that Assam is going to be a Muslim dominated state near future.

Table-IV: Growth of Muslim population (%) in some of the Border Districts of Assam during 1971-2001.

Districts	1971-1991		1991--2001	
	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim
Dhubri	-6.07	+6.0	-4.0	+3.84
Goalpara	-11.0	+8.6	-1.68	+3.61
Barpeta	-9.4	+7.3	-1.10	+8.9
Karimganj	-4.9	+5.0	-5.5	+3.1
Marigaon	-4.85	+4.90	-2.34	+2.29
Nagaon	-7.87	+7.3	-3.93	+3.90

It is clear from the above Table-IV that in some border districts of Assam the percentages of Hindu population have been decreasing decade to decade whereas it is increasing in case of the Muslim population. Various studies of renowned thinkers of the state have already proved it with data that Muslim migrants have entered to these border districts in large numbers along with the Hindu migrants (Bhuyan, 2002). With the help of analysis of data, they have also showed that the natural growth rate of Muslims should not have much difference between Bangladesh and Assam; but the difference in actual rate clearly confirms the migration of Muslims to Assam during 1971-2001 (Kumar, 2002).

Some Recommendations to Meet the Problem:

Uncontrolled illegal immigration of the Bangladeshis is a serious problem the country is facing today. It is no more a regional problem, as they are spreading throughout the country now. How to deal with millions of these illegal migrants is a question to which there are no easy answers. Here, we would like to put some recommendations taken at a two-day National Seminar on “Illegal Migration from Bangladesh” organized by Astha Bharati in association with the Centre for North-East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) in New Delhi on 27 and 28 November, 2001:

- Illegal migration from Bangladesh must be recognized as a national problem and not a regional issue. The Central and State Governments must not underplay the gravity of the threat posed to national security.

- All political parties should put the issue of illegal migration and their view on ways to tackle it on their agenda.
- The Central Government should appoint a National Immigration Commission to frame a National Migration Policy and a National Refugee Policy. The Commission should examine ways of strengthening the Foreigners Act, 1946, as well as feasibility of Identity Cards for both citizens and non-citizens and Work Permits for migrants.
- The Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act of 1983 should be repealed.
- Preventive measures should be taken urgently to curb further illegal migration. The existing Border Security Force posts and the BSF water wing should be strengthened and border fencing, patrolling and lighting should be improved.
- The National Register of Citizens of 1951 should be reviewed, computerized and updated. The process of updating the NRC should be done regularly and citizen registration should be made compulsory by law.
- Governments, non-government organizations and media should launch campaigns to educate the public about the dangers inherent in illegal influx.

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