

The Change of Religion and Language Composition in the State of Assam in Northeast India: A Statistical Analysis Since 1951 to 2001

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Abstract- The aim of this study is to examine the change of population composition in terms of religion and language in the districts of state Assam in Northeast India during post independence period. The analysis is based on district level census data of Assam during 1951 to 2001. The result shows that the proportion of Muslim population has been rising rapidly in some districts whereas the Hindu population is declining and losing their share in all the districts of Assam. The change of religious composition has been projected by using polynomial curve fitting and it is found that Hindu and other religion may become minority in Assam after 2040 in comparison to combined proportion of Muslim and Christian population. The growth of various language speaking population is also analyzed and it is observed that the proportion of Bengali speaking population is also rapidly rising but the proportion of Assamese speakers are declining in all the districts of Assam. To investigate the impact of cross border migration the growth of Muslim population in Assam and Bangladesh is also compared in this study.

Index Terms- Religion, Language, Curve fitting, Assam

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the basic socio-cultural characteristic of a society. Different people understand and express religious identity in their own way. The growth and decline of populations and changes in the relative balance between various groups of religion within a population play a crucial role in the rise and fall of nations and even civilization. On the other hand language is the most important medium of human interaction. The demands for more autonomy, separate states based on language not only challenge and threaten the political stability of the country but also very often lead to ethnic conflicts. North East India is surrounded by the border of four countries which are Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar. Though they are separated by political boundary but they have a cultural affinity in both side of the border. Therefore it is important for us to know the changing demographic patterns to make an informed judgment about the cross boarder migration and strategic pressures that India is likely to face from its neighboring countries in the near future. This paper examined the changing trend of population composition in terms of religion and language in Assam and all districts during post independence period. This change of religious composition has been projected by using polynomial curve fitting. Moreover to investigate the

impact of cross border migration on religious change the growth of Muslim population of Assam and Bangladesh is also compared in this study.

The Census organization of India is the only instrument that collects the individual information of various religions and language. In this study the religion and language analysis based on district level census data of Assam during 1951 to 2001. The religion data of Bangladesh from 1974 to 2001 has been collected from the publication of National Series, Volume -I, Analytical Report, Oct, 2007 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

II. RELIGION CHANGE

Almost all the major religions of the world are practiced in Assam. It represents in full the religious diversity of the country. Besides the major religions, some of the tribes also follow animism, and worship nature in its various manifestations. The Hindus, who constitute a majority of the population practice different disciplines of Hinduism. The Muslim is the second largest religion in Assam and occupied 31 percent population according to 2001 census. Although there have been some Muslim population in Assam for several centuries, Most Muslims are recent settlers from Bangladesh. The older Muslims are well integrated with the society (Barpujari, 1990). There are scattered populations of Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains in different parts of the State. So far as change of religious composition in Assam, being a Hindu majority state, fears that it will become Muslim-dominated due to high growth of Muslim population. The October 2008 violence in Udalguri and Goalpara districts between the Bodos community and the Bangladeshi migrants was a flare up based on such social fears resulting in the death of nearly 36 people (Goswami, 2011). It is therefore important to analyze the changing demography of different religious groups in Assam. According to 2001 census the various religious group living in Assam and India respectively are 64.9 and 80.5 per cent Hindu, 30.9 and 13.4 per cent Muslim, 3.7 and 2.3 percent Christian and 0.5 and 3.8 per cent other religion. It is seen that the proportion of Muslim population in Assam is significantly higher than that of the country as a whole. Strikingly, Assam occupies second position after Jammu and Kashmir in terms of proportion of Muslim population in the country (Kar, 2007). It is seen in table-1 that during 1951-2001 the Muslim population increased by 6 percent whereas Hindu population declined by 7.2 per cent. The percentage change of Christian and other religion during this period are 1.7 and -0.5 percent respectively. This significantly high growth of Muslim population in the state may

due to the consequence of large scale Muslim migration from Bangladesh and also prevalence of high birth rate (Nath.*et.al*, 2012). As a consequence of the slow improvement of socio

economic conditions among the Hindus, the natural growth rate of population among them has declined to a great extent in the state during the period (Kar, 2007).

Table 1: District wise Percentage of major Religious group in Assam during 1951-2001.
(Area of Districts adjusted according to 1951 census)

Religion	Year	Assam	Goalpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Lakhimpur	Nowgoang	Sibsagar	UMNC Hills	Cachar
Hindus	1951	72.1	51.5	69.7	78.6	90.8	58.4	92	80.5	60.6
	1961	66.4	50.9	69.2	75.7	90	57.9	91.7	81.2	63.2
	1971	72.5	53.9	70	78.5	91.5	59.6	92.2	88.1	58.7
	1991	67.1	47	64.3	70.8	88.7	52.4	89.7	82.6	62.1
	2001	64.9	43.3	63.4	67.7	88.4	48.9	89	80.1	52.8
Muslims	1951	24.9	42.9	29.3	17.2	4.8	40.5	5.8	0.2	38.5
	1961	23.3	43.3	29.4	19.4	5.6	41.2	5.8	1.3	32.7
	1971	24.6	42.3	28.8	16.2	4.6	39.5	5.2	1.2	39.9
	1991	28.4	46.9	32.9	22.2	6	46.7	6.4	1.7	32.8
	2001	30.9	51.3	34.9	25.2	6.5	50.1	6.9	2.3	45.5
Christians	1951	2	2.8	0.7	4	3.2	0.5	1.7	7.7	0.8
	1961	6.4	3.3	0.9	4.6	3.5	0.6	1.9	9.8	2.6
	1971	2.6	3.6	0.9	5.1	3.2	0.7	2.1	10.3	1.3
	1991	3.3	4.3	1.1	6.1	3.7	0.6	3.3	14.7	4.6
	2001	3.7	5.2	1.3	6.7	4	0.7	3.3	16.8	1.5
Other	1951	1	2.7	0.2	0.2	1.3	0.5	0.4	11.6	0.1
	1961	3.9	2.4	0.6	0.3	0.9	0.2	0.5	7.7	1.4
	1971	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.1
	1991	1.1	1.7	1.7	0.8	1.7	0.2	0.6	1	0.4
	2001	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.4	1.1	0.2	0.7	0.9	0.3

Source: 1. General Report ,Census of India 1961 , Assam 2. Census of India 1971, Series-I 3. Census of India 1991, Series-4, Part iv-B 4. Census of India 2001, Religion Table (CD).

So far the growth of population during 1951-2001 at district level is concerned all the districts witnessing very high growth of Muslim population than the growth of other religion. The proportion of Muslim population in undivided district Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgoan and Cachar has been increased by 6%, 8%, 10%, and 7% respectively. But in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and UM&NC hills district this growth of Muslim population during 1951-2001 is only 2%, 1%, and 2% respectively. The undivided district of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Nowgoan are in continuation of the eastern border belt of high Muslim presence and growth. The undivided Cachar district also falls near the border of Bangladesh and showing high Muslim presence and growth. On the other hand in almost all districts of Assam and in the state as a whole the Hindu and other Religions declined during 1951-2001. In a similar way the percentage declined of Hindu population in Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgoan and Cachar are 6%, 11%, 10%, and 8% respectively. But in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and UM&NC hills district this decline of Hindu population during 1951-2001 is only 2%, 3%, and 0.5% respectively. The

percentage increase of Christian population during 1951-2001 in all the districts are 1 to 2 percent only except undivided UM&NC hills district which is 9.1%. A major reason behind growth of Christian population in Assam is the intense movement of conversion towards Christianity. The high growth of the Christian population in Assam is mainly due to conversion of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe to Christianity (Ghosh, 2000). Table-2 represents the district wise percentage of religion in all 23 district of Assam during 1971-2001. According to 2001 census the percentage of Muslim population in some districts like Dhuburi(74.3),Barpeta(59.4),Goalpara(53.7),Nagoan(51.0),Kari mganj(52.3),Hailakandi(57.6) have occupied dominant position. But out of 23 districts in Assam the 17 districts are Hindu dominant where proportion of Hindu population is above 50 percent.

Table 2: District wise Percentage of major Religious group in all 23 districts of Assam during 1971-2001.
 (Area of Districts according to 2001 census)

District	Hindu			Muslims			Christian			other		
	1971	1991	2001	1971	1991	2001	1971	1991	2001	1971	1991	2001
Assam	72.5	67.1	64.9	24.6	28.4	30.9	2.6	3.3	3.7	0.3	1.1	0.5
Dhubri	34.8	28.7	24.7	64.5	70.5	74.3	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.2	0.2
Kokrajhar	76.2	66.4	65.6	17.0	19.3	20.4	6.7	9.8	13.7	0.1	4.5	0.3
Bongaigaon	69.8	64.0	59.2	27.8	32.7	38.5	2.3	2.2	2.1	0.1	1.0	0.2
Goalpara	50.1	39.9	38.2	41.5	50.2	53.7	8.1	7.9	7.9	0.2	2.0	0.2
Barpeta	51.1	40.3	40.2	48.6	56.1	59.4	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	3.4	0.1
Nalbari	83.7	77.5	76.1	15.4	19.9	22.1	0.6	1.1	1.6	0.2	1.5	0.2
Kamrup	77.5	74.3	72.8	20.5	23.4	24.8	1.6	1.6	1.8	0.4	0.7	0.7
Darrang	70.3	60.5	57.7	23.9	32.0	35.5	5.6	6.3	6.5	0.2	1.2	0.3
Sonitpur	86.0	80.2	76.6	9.1	13.3	15.9	4.6	6.0	6.9	0.4	0.5	0.6
Lakhimpur	85.1	79.7	79.1	10.9	14.5	16.1	3.7	4.0	4.1	0.4	1.8	0.7
Dhemaji	98.9	93.9	95.9	0.6	1.5	1.8	0.3	1.0	1.1	0.1	3.6	1.1
Marigaon	59.4	54.6	52.2	40.4	45.3	47.6	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Nagaon	59.6	51.7	47.8	39.2	47.2	51.0	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.2	0.3	0.3
Golaghat	91.3	86.1	85.9	5.2	7.1	7.9	3.3	6.3	5.5	0.3	0.5	0.6
Jorhat	94.2	93.6	92.9	3.9	4.3	4.8	1.4	1.5	1.9	0.5	0.6	0.5
Sibsagar	91.1	89.3	88.2	6.7	7.6	8.2	1.8	2.3	2.7	0.4	0.8	0.9
Dibrugarh	92.9	91.3	90.8	3.7	4.5	4.5	2.9	3.4	3.8	0.6	0.8	0.9
Tinsukia	91.8	90.2	89.5	2.4	3.1	3.5	4.3	4.9	5.4	1.5	1.8	1.6
Karbi Anglong	90.3	84.8	82.4	1.3	1.6	2.2	8.0	12.5	14.5	0.4	1.1	0.9
North Cachar Hills	77.0	72.9	69.9	0.9	2.2	2.5	21.9	24.5	26.7	0.2	0.4	0.9
Karimganj	55.1	50.1	46.7	44.2	49.2	52.3	0.5	0.6	0.9	0.1	0.1	0.1
Hailakandi	47.5	43.7	41.1	51.4	54.8	57.6	1.1	1.3	1.0	0.0	0.2	0.3
Cachar	65.4	63.4	61.4	32.5	34.5	36.1	2.0	1.9	2.2	0.1	0.2	0.3

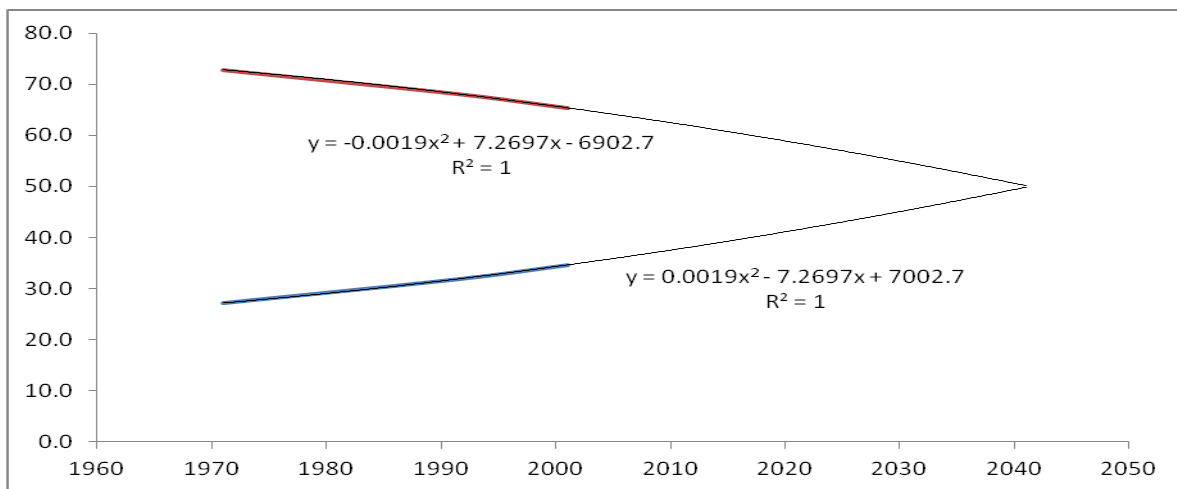


Figure 1: The projected growth trend of major Religious group in Assam.

It is seen that the proportion of Muslim population is rising and Hindu population is losing their share in all the districts of Assam. In this study the time series data of percentage change of religion during 1971 to 2001 has been used to statistically project the trend in the near future. The projection by obtaining the best possible fit for the available data points and resulting trend line extend further in to the future is presented in figure-1. The upper curve in the graph plots is indicating the percentage change of Hindu and other population and lower curve indicating the percentage change of Muslim and Christian population. The available data fits best to a polynomial equation of third order as R^2 value is 1. The two curves projected in to the future intersect at the 50 percent mark in around 2040. Thus, if the change of proportion of religious population in the last 30 years continues then Hindu and other religion become minority in Assam in comparison to combined proportion of Muslim and Christian population after 2040.

III. CHANGE OF LANGUAGE SPEAKING POPULATION

India's northeastern state Assam is one of the most heterogeneous linguistic and cultural regions of the country. The region presents a mixed and varied population of diverse linguistic groups, each group having a distinct life-style and heritage, and even aspiring for a separate political identity (Nath.*et al*, 2012). There is large number of tribes in this region and each tribe speaks a different language which is not understood by its immediate neighboring tribe. In Assam there are two major schedule language Assamese and Bengali. They represent 49 and 28 percent of the total population of the state respectively as per 2001 census data. Although Assamese is the state language, it is largely confined to only the Brahmaputra valley. In Barak Valley Bengali (Sylheti) is the dominant language and it is also found in significant number in the other districts of the state. As per 2001 census there are 23 notified

scheduled tribes in Assam. The different tribes of Assam are Bodo, Mishing, Rava, Tiwa(lalung), Deuri,Chakma, dimasa Kachari, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Hojai, Mech etc. Due to a large number of tribal groups Assam also has a significantly high proportion of non scheduled language speakers. Among these Boro, Mishing, Karbi, Garo,Santali and Rava_are the major non schedule languages whose number of speakers are more than one lakh population each. The Boro language speakers live mostly in Kokrajhar, Bongaigoan, Barpeta,Nalbari, Darrang and Sonitpur (more than one lakh each).According to 2001 census the Mishing speakers mostly in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district(above 1 lakh each) , Karbi in Karbi Anglong district (more than 3 lakh) and the Garo speakers mostly in Goalpara district (more than 60 thousand). The Nepali speaking people mainly in Sonitpur (above 1 lakh) and Tinsukia district (above 80 thousand) and Hindi speaking people live mainly in tea garden and urban area. In this study for analyzing language data of Assam during 1951-2001, all the languages are divided in to 5 groups viz Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali and Others Language. In the group of Assamese language includes Assamese and other local tribal and tea garden language. In the group of other language contains all other northeastern and other Indian language. Table-3 represents the details of language groups. Table-4 represents the district wise percentage of language during 1951-2001.The area consider undivided 9 districts of Assam in 1951.It is observed from table -4 that the percentage increase of Bengali speaking population is inordinately high than all the other groups of language. During 1951 to 2001 the percentage of Bengali speaking population has increased by 6 percent from 21.2 to 27.5 but during these periods the proportion of Assamese speaking people in Assam had declined by 9 percent i.e. from 69.3 to 60.8. The percentage change of Hindi, Nepali and other language speaking people is only 1 to 2 percent.

Table 3: Different Languages and their Groups

Assamese	Bengali	Hindi	Nepali	Other Language				
Assamese, Boro Karbi, Santali Rabha, Dimasa Lalung, Miri Deori, Munda Mundari Oriya Kurukh Khariya Bhumij	Bengali,	Hindi	Nepali	Zemi Rengna Khelma Garo Rangkhoh Pewi Halam Dafala Khampati Meithe Lakher Kabui,	Kuki Thado Paite Mizo Biete Bishnupuria Reang, Mishimi Abor Synteng Koch Ao.	Naga Vajphei Khasi Hmar Gangte Tripuri Adi Aka Manipuri Mech Jaintia Telegu	Urdu English Sindhi Marathi Gondi Kherwari Sema	Bhojpuri Ho Tamil, Chinese Savra Punjabi Malayalam

In the district wise language speaking population the undivided district of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nagoan are in continuation of eastern border belt and show high Bengali speakers presence and growth. The Bengali speakers in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong district has increased by 11, 11, 17, and 7 percent respectively during 1971 to 2001. Another border district Cachar was the only district of Assam to have a significant Bengali speaking population (77.1) in 1951 and proportion of Bengali speakers rose by 80 percent in 2001. In the rest of districts the percentage increases of Bengali speaker is comparatively low, increasing only 1 to 2 percent except UM&NC Hills where percentage of Bengali speakers increase by 7 percent. So far as the percentage increase of other language is concerned in all the districts the proportion of Assamese language has declined during 1951-2001 and it has more rapidly declined in most of the border districts from 10 to 26 percent.

There is no major change seen for Hindi, Nepali and Other language groups.

Due to the historical links, geographical and physical proximity the migrants of northeast India are mainly from Bangladesh. The state Assam has 262 km border with Bangladesh out of which 92 km is riverine (Sinha, 1998) therefore migration from Bangladesh to Assam is much easier. Since Bangladesh is a Muslim dominant country therefore to know the impact of cross border migration on religious change it is essential for us to compare the growth of Muslim population in both sides of the border. In Bangladesh the average annual growth in per thousand Muslim populations during 1974 -1991 and 1991-2001 are 29.1 and 18.7 respectively. But corresponding Muslim population growth in Assam comparatively very high which are 38.7 and 29.3 respectively. This is very much suggestive that the cross border migration from Bangladesh may behind this unusual growth.

Table 4: District wise Percentage of Language in Assam during 1951-2001 (Area of Districts adjusted according to 1951 census)

State/Dist	Year	Assam	Cachar	Goalpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Nowgong	Sibsagar	Lakhimpur	UMNC Hills
Assamese	1951	69.3	1.8	76.8	81.3	82.2	72.1	88.6	78.1	81.2
	1961	70.1	2.2	81.9	82.1	73.6	78.1	89.4	75.7	65.7
	1971	70.1	2.3	78.8	82.5	73.7	75.6	90.4	75.1	66.3
	1991	69.4	1.8	73.3	78.1	75.7	74.5	92.6	78.2	61.7
	2001	60.8	2	66.3	68.3	55.9	64.4	87.3	71	59
Bengali	1951	21.2	77.1	17.4	15.1	7	23.4	3.4	7.8	5.1
	1961	18.5	78.7	12	9.9	9.8	17.3	3.1	8.2	8.4
	1971	19.7	77.8	14.7	12.3	13.3	19.3	3.7	9.3	10.5
	1991	21.7	79.9	21.3	17	13.6	21.2	2.7	8.5	11.9
	2001	27.5	80	28.3	25.6	24.4	30.5	4.3	10.6	12.3
Hindi	1951	4	10.5	2.6	1.7	3.3	2.7	3	5.4	1.9
	1961	4.6	10.3	2.9	2.3	5.1	2.8	3.3	7	3.2
	1971	5.4	11.3	3.3	2.7	6	3.5	3.6	8.8	7.1
	1991	4.6	10.3	2.4	2.7	4.7	2.6	2.4	7.6	8.8
	2001	5.9	10.1	2.4	3.5	10.5	3.4	3.6	9	9.3
Nepali	1951	1.1	0.2	0.9	0.7	3.2	0.4	0.8	2.1	0.6
	1961	1.7	0.1	0.8	0.8	5.3	0.7	1	3.2	3.3
	1971	2.4	0.2	1.1	1.5	5.9	0.7	1.5	5.1	6.4
	1991	1.9	0.2	0.9	1.2	4.5	0.5	1.1	4.1	6.1
	2001	2.1	0.2	0.7	1.2	5.6	0.5	1.3	4.5	5.9
Others	1951	4.4	10.4	2.3	1.3	4.2	1.5	4.2	6.7	11.3
	1961	5	8.6	2.4	5.1	6.1	1.2	3.2	5.9	19.4
	1971	2.4	8.4	2.2	0.9	1.1	0.9	0.8	1.6	9.7
	1991	2.5	7.8	2.2	1	1.7	1.2	1.2	1.7	11.8
	2001	3.8	7.7	2.4	1.4	4	1.2	3.5	5.2	13.5

Source: 1.Statistical Abstract of Assam 1960-61, Table-1.8 2. Census of India 1971, Table C-V, 3. Census of India 1991, Assam State and District profile , Table -30, 4.Census of India 2001, C-16

IV. CONCLUSION

The empirical analysis based on district level census data shows that the proportion of Muslim and Bengali speaking population are rapidly rising during 1951-2001 than the other religion and language. This unusual high growth is not only for the natural increase alone. The natural growth rate of Muslim should not have much difference between Bangladesh and Assam. But the difference in actual rate clearly confirms the migration of Muslim to Assam (Bhuyan, 2006). The unusual high growth of Muslim and Bengali population in Assam may be due to cross border illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh to Assam (Nath *et al.*, 2012). It is a matter of grave concern because if the change of proportion of religious population continues with this trend; then it is possible that the Assamese Hindu become minority in their own state. In present study from the statistically projected trend it is found that the Hindu and other religion will become minority in comparison to combined proportion of Muslim and Christian population after 2040. The former governor of Assam S.K Sinha expressed in his report in 1998 that illegal migrants threatens to reduce the Assamese people to a minority in their own State, as happened in Tripura and Sikkim.

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