

Ethnic Conflict in Assam on The Backdrop of Socio-Economic Insecurity

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ABSTRACT

The paper intends to argue and establish the fact that the ethnic conflict in Assam is the result of socio-economic insecurity and it has its root in the beginning of 13th Century. The arrival of the Ahoms and subsequent conflicts with the local tribes, the colonial rule, and the pressure of continuing illegal influx during the colonial and post-colonial era etc. have a consecutive and consequential role to play to in resulting socio-economic instability in the region taking the form of ethnic conflicts. After independence the state had a requirement of a well-planned socio-economic policy for securing the rights and aspirations of various ethnic groups living over the territory for ages. But no such socio-economic plans have been created for resolving the basic areas of ethnic conflict even now. For this reason only the ethnic conflict of Assam as well as socio-economic frustration of the multi-ethnic state are considered as a socio-politic gimmick of both state and central government. The paper embodies the socio-economic and political causes behind the ethnic conflict in Assam and the prospective direction and resolution for an everlasting socio-political stability of the region.

Key Words : Assam, Conflict, Immigration, Bangladesh, Ahom

INTRODUCTION

Assam, situated in the north-eastern part of India has a history of many centuries on immigrants to share. Prior to the British occupation and annexation in the early nineteenth century, the medieval kingdom of Assam had been under the Ahom kings for nearly six centuries.¹ Ahoms, who came from the upper Myanmar, invaded Assam in the year 1228AD. Sukapha founded the Ahom Kingdom. He was the brother of the King of Maulang, a powerful Shan Kingdom in northern Myanmar. Sukapha, after a fight with his brother left Maulang in around 1215 AD and marched towards east. After a hard period of thirteen years he reached

Patkai range of hills which separates Myanmar and Assam and eventually ended up Khamjang in Assam in 1228 AD. Both the Ahoms and Brahminical legends attributed divine ancestry to the Ahoms, describing them as the descendants of the Lord of Heaven, Called Indra by the Hindus and Lengdon by the Deodhais, Ahom tribal priests.

Sukapha, a homeless wanderer who left Maulang with two councillors called Bar Gohain and Burha Gohain, eight nobles and nine thousand men, women and children met repeated resistance from Nagas of the Patkai before finally defeating them frightfully. After

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conquering Patkai and leaving it under his nobles Sukapha crossed the Pangchu pass in the Patkai Mountain and entered the plains of Modern Sivasagar district. The region was between Dikhau and Disang River and was ruled by Morans and Barahis. Sukapha defeated the tribal kings and immediately after that adopted a wise policy of treating them as equal and advocated intermarriage between the Ahoms and the Morans and Barahais and he paved the way by himself by marrying Moran and Barahai princess. Sukapha after establishing his Kingdom and capital in Charaideo in 1253, died in 1268 AD. Followed by a rule of nearly 600 years Ahom kingdom saw a large number of rulers after Sukpha. These rulers for the territorial expansion of Ahom Kingdom either involved in conflict with local tribal kings of Nagas, Kacharis, Chutias, Morans etc. or made treaties pushing them away from their own territory or by making them bow down resulting ultimately in loss of right over their own land. However, there are many instances of peaceful and cordial relations between the two. Sukapha's son *Suteupha* during his regime occupied Kachari territory. *Subinpha*, son of *Suteupha* during his rule included Moran territory in to the Ahom kingdom by marrying Moran princes. *Sukhangpha*, the son and successor of *Subinpha* entered into many battles, most remarkable being the one with the distant Kamata, ruled by Pratapdhvaj. Another ruler *Sutupha* entered into multiple battles with the Chutia King and eventually he was murdered. Another Ahom ruler *Suhenpha* was also involved in a war with the Kacharis on the bank of Dikhau and was defeated in 1490. *Suhungmung* likewise dominated the 'Bara Bhuyan's' and incorporated their territory to the Ahom Kingdom. Ahom King *Pratap Singha* in 1606 defeated the Kacharis at Dharamtika. The Kacharis retreated to Maibong. The Kachari Struggle continued under Bhim Darpa, the

eldest son of the Kachari King. During the rule of Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-63 AD) there was a conflict between Ahoms and Jaintias when Jasamatta Roy, successor of King Jasha Manik demanded before the Ahom King Jayadhvaj Singha that Dimarua, Gobha and two other states, which were protectorates of the Ahoms, be restored to the Jaintias.

The Moamoria rebellion between the Morans, adherents of the Moamara Sattra, and the Ahom kings eventually paved the way for annexation of the depopulated region by the Britishers after the Burmese incursion.

The acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1756 brought the East India Company into direct contact with the Ahom Kingdom.² The condition of the Brahmaputra valley at the time of the expulsion of the Burmese was most deplorable. There was major shrink in population in the valley and when British came they were in need of a huge number of trained manpower to tackle their administrative activities and later for their emerging oil, tea, coal and Timber business in the region and for construction of infrastructure created this demand. Assam was not in position to supply such a huge trained manpower to cope with British requirements. This situation resulted in bringing the man power from outside the state by the Colonial Administrators. The Bengali Hindu Babus were the first to come to Assam from the neighboring East Bengal. They were encouraged by the Colonialists to occupy the clerical and supervisory positions in the newly setup British Administrative machinery. Weiner observes:

[E]arly in their administration, the British sought to make use of high-ranking officials from the Ahom government . . . But these officials did not fit into the Anglo-Mughal administrative structure created by the British in Assam. They had never kept written records; even judicial proceedings were

¹Goswami, The History of Assam From Yandaboo to Partition, 1826-1947, 9.

conducted without recording the statements of witnesses, complainants, or defendants. Moreover, the new administrative offices and titles created by the British, such as *tahsildar* or district revenue collector, were not based on indigenous Ahom administrative structures, but were adapted from British governance in Bengal. It was no wonder, therefore, that the British increasingly imported trained Bengali officers to work in Assam.³

They were followed by the Tea laborers from Chhotanagpur, Marwaris and land thirsty Bengali Muslim peasants from the East Bangal/ Bangadesh, Nepalis etc. But it was the continuous migration of Muslims of East Bengali origin - and not the other communities -that threatened the very existence of the indigenous inhabitant of the land.

The objectives guiding the investigation on the central theme of the work are

- 1) The ethnic conflicts in Assam maintain some historical and geo-political link experienced by the region since 12 century A.D.
- 2) The present state of socio-economic unrest in Assam is the result of inadequate and non-operational socio-economic policies of the central government.

Ahom Era

Pre-Historic Account: Millennia before the arrival of the Ahoms, Assam was occupied by the Austriacs or the Austro-Asiatics. They were supposed to have migrated from the Austronesian and other islands of the pacific into the Asian mainland. The stone columns or megaliths they placed over the graves of their dead are scattered over different places of Assam, indicating that they inhabited a wide area of the region. Their language Monkhmer had similarities with the dialect spoken by the Munda tribe,

who are also said to have migrated to India from South East Asia. As E.A Gait observes

“...that the Munda Languages were imported by Mongolian immigrants through Assam or Burma whose distinctive physical type became merge in that of the earlier Dravidian inhabitants.”⁴

The khasis and the Jaintias are supposed to be their descendants. The earliest inhabitants of present day Assam are the Bodos. These tribes of Mongoloid stock probably came to Assam much later than the Austriacs however not much known about these early migrations and movements into Assam as the science of history is unknown to the inhabitants of Assam till the arrival of the Ahoms in 1228 AD. Various scattered instances of the land and the mythological clues indicate that the land was ruled by the Danava Dynesty, The Asuras, The Varman Dynesty, The Salastambha Dynesty, Pala Dynesty etc. prior to the invasion of the Ahoms. With the arrival of the Ahom in the territory of Assam resulted in conflicts with the local tribal kings belonging to various ethnic groups like Bodo-Kacharis, Koch Kingdom, The Mataks, the Borahis and the Morans etc. These conflicts centered mainly on the possession and right over land and these resulted from the social, Political and Economic insecurity of the indigenous Assamese people. H.K Barpujari asserts in this context “In the next three centuries the conquerors (Ahom) reduced to submission the Morans, the Borhis and the Nagas and the original inhabitant of the region and brought under effective control the greater part of the Brahmaputra.”⁵

MAJOR CONFLICTS DURING AHOM ERA

Ahom And The Kachari Conflicts (13th Century AD–1854): The Kacharis may perhaps be described the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley.⁶ They came into conflict

² Ibid., 11 ³ Weiner, Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, 92.

with the Ahom kings many a times. During the reign of Suteupha (1268-1281 AD), Sukaphas's successor, the Kachari territory between the Dikhau and Namdang rivers was annexed by the Ahoms. Again during the rule of Suhenpha in 1490 AD, the clash took place between the two where the Kacharis won and recovered their lost territory. A major war broke out between the Ahom and the Kachari kingdom in 1526 AD and the Kacharis, though won the first war, suffered a crushing defeat in the second on the banks of the Dhansiri in 1531 and paved the way for expansion of the Ahom dominance till Dimapur. After expelling the Kacharis completely from Dimapur in the year 1936 by another war,⁷ the Ahoms established their new capital at Maibong (north cacher) by the Mahur River. Rudra Singha, on another occasion sent a troop of 70,000 army in 1706 AD to punish Tamradhaj, the Kahari King for boldly asserting their independence. During the Krishnachandra's reign, many Moamarias, who were revolting against the Ahoms, took shelter in the Kachari Kingdom, from where they carried out their raids on Ahom territory. When the Ahom king Kamaleshwar Singha demanded their extradition, Krishnachandra refused, leading to a two year war with ahoms (1803-1805 AD). Who inflicted a crushing defeat on the kacharis and Moamaria allies.

Ahom And The Chutiya Conflicts (AD1187–1673) : Chutiya kingdom was established on the north bank of the River Brahmaputra in north-eastern Assam and parts of Arunachal Pradesh by Birpal. The Chutiyas were a Tibeto-Burmese race who secured power in Assam at the same time as the Khen kings and Barobhuyan chieftains (to the west), during the decline of the Kamarupa kingdom. They claimed descent from remnants of the former Mlechha kings of Assam. During the reign of Ahom king Sutuphaa, there were frequent skirmishes between Ahoms and Sutiya. In 1376, Sutuphaa was killed by the Chutiya King

⁴ Gait, A Brief History of Assam, 5.

evidently Jayadhvajpal during a friendly encounter. During the following years, both the sides got involved in numerous battles. Dhirnarayan alias Dharmadhvajpal, encountered in many battles with the Ahoms. In 1513, a battle with the Ahoms took place; king Dhirnarayan attacked the Ahom Kingdom both by land and water. The Ahoms were victorious in the battle fought at Dikhomukh. But in 1520, the Sutiya invaded the Ahom territory twice, in the second invasion the Sutiya killed the Ahom commander and were successful in defeating the Ahoms in the battle fought at Dihing. In 1522, Dhirnarayan due to his growing age wished to pass the throne to his son Sadhank Narayan but the prince was too young to handle the duties of being a king, seeing no option Dhirnarayan gave away his throne to Nityapal, who was the husband of his daughter Sadhani. Nityapal belonged to a humble family and had no experience in administration. The Sutiya nobilities and ministers opposed Dhirnarayan's decision of giving away the throne to Nityapal. In 1524, the Ahoms taking advantage of this chance attacked a much weaker Sutiya Kingdom. As a partial culmination of the inter-kingdom feud, the Ahoms took Sadiya and killed Nityapal. Further to strengthen their position, the Ahoms set up colonies in the Sutiya country and a number of Brahmins, blacksmiths and artisans were deported from Sadiya to Charaideo. However the Sutiya went to the countryside where they were still in power and continued their fight against the Ahoms to reclaim their lost territories. The conflict went on for next 150 years until it finally ended in 1673 when the Sutiya fell under the domination of the Ahoms and were absorbed into their state. Rajmohan Nath observes, "The Ahom know the use of gun-powder in fire arms and as a matter of fact, they credited with their first use in India."⁸

Ahom And The Koch Conflicts (AD1543–68): The conflict between the Ahom and Koch kingdom was the conflict with an intention to

exert control over of the Brahmaputra Valley by both the kingdoms. It started with Nara Narayana ascending to power and consolidating his hold over the western portion; and it ended with the failure of Chilarai's campaign against Sulaiman Karrani. This was followed by an alliance that soon gave away to a fierce conflict between the Ahoms and the Mughals.

COLONIAL RULE AND IMMIGRATION: A Quick Overview

The Burmese defeat in the hands of the British East India Company resulted in the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo 'concluded on the 24th February in 1826'⁹. This treaty is considered as a watershed moment in the history of Assam as it resulted in the gradual extinction of the dominance of the Ahom Empire after the annexation of the region by the colonial rulers. The primary motive behind the annexation and expansion of the British empire to the North-Eastern frontier of India was however economic. Major colonial policies in Assam were initiated invariably with two objectives in mind which was in fact the case with the rest of India – revenue maximization and resource exploration/exploitation. Direct appropriation of the colony's surplus in the form of revenue was needed to finance the cost of administration, purchase of colonial products, and also to maintain the army.¹⁰

The colonial empire was keen on producing tea in India as they witnessed China being the sole player dominating this trade. 'In 1834, the First Tea Committee was formed'¹¹. Britishers accomplished successful manufacture of Tea in 1837 and started the Assam Tea company in 1839. This tradition of Tea manufacturing demanded huge quantity of labour. In carrying out their operations the

planters had to face immense difficulties, particularly of labour, both skilled and unskilled. The Chinese tea-makers had to be imported in initial stages from their settlements in Singpur, Batavia and Penang. A Chinese tea-maker could not be had at less than rupees fourty where his Assamese counterpart (*tekela*) could be engaged at less than rupees ten. Apart from being costly the Chinese at times proved themselves "intractable and worthless". The unfriendly relations that then existed with the Government of China ultimately forced the planters to resort to local artisans.¹² Till 1843 labourers were imported from China to serve the purpose however the Kacharies were later employed for the cultivation of Tea which was though not proved as fruitful as expected. The people of Assam were reluctant to work as day labourers and under no circumstances at the cost of their own cultivation.¹³ The indigenous people were loath to work hard mainly because they had limited wants; they were satisfied with the humblest of food, plainest of clothes and smallest of habitations. The requirements of their daily life were produced by their own toil.¹⁴ The colonial rulers were left with no option but to encourage immigration to fulfill vacuum caused by the short supply of native labours. The main reason for the failure of the native population to respond to this demand was the pattern of Ahom administration. Ahom regime was not much concern about trade and commerce and progressive people's education was virtually absent.

Pertaining to the increasing demand starting 1859 onwards the process of import of the tea garden labourers for the central India started and the legal sanction to this was attributed by the first labour Act passed in 1863. The process of recruitment of these labourers is termed as Arkattis meaning

⁵ Barpujari (General Editor), *Political History of Assam*, Volume One, 2.

⁶ Gait, *A Brief History of Assam*, 299.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 301

licensed recruiters and later through an amendment in 1870 the 'Sardari System' was introduced. The need for migrant labourers was further stimulated by the population decrease in Goalpara and Nowgong district due to 'Black Fever' followed by a devastating earthquake of 1897. Precisely the last two decades of the 19th century severely affected the population structure of Assam which made the demand for the migrants from outside Assam authentic for the economic progress of the land. Further the rise of the Jute industry worldwide during the period led the Britishers to expand their trade and facilitate Jute cultivation in Assam creating more demand for the migrant labourers. This demand was however successfully fulfilled by large number of migrant workers due to the railway transport facility newly available then making geographical connection between Bengal and Assam easily accessible. These migrants did not restrict themselves to the industry alone but by the beginning of the 19th century the professions like teachers, lawyers, doctors, and journalists, railway and post office workers were largely occupied by the Bengali Hindu migrants. The language factor here played a key role as the Bengali and Assamese languages are quite similar. Bengalis managed to convince the Britishers that the Assamese language was merely a "corrupt and vulgar dialect" and therefore it is the Bengali language that should become the official language of the state of Assam.¹⁵ On the other hand the inflow of the Bengali Muslim land hungry peasants began at a rapid rate towards the western part of Assam to take the advantage of sparsely populated cultivable land of the countryside. This migration resulted in

constituting 20% population of the total bordering district population by the early part of the 19th century. With subsequently gaining the land rights this Bengali speaking Muslim community slowly created their own cultural, traditional and linguistic identity. Though initially the immigration policy was formulated to facilitate the East Bengali hard working labourers to make use of the cultivable waste land of Assam to accelerate the economy of the state but soon this policy turned out to be prime source of large scale influx in the subsequent years. These migrants were mainly from the Mymensingh, Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna. This concerning phenomena was first officially publicly revealed by the Census Report of 1911. These Bengali speaking Muslim migrants came with direct confrontation with the indigenous people of the land especially with the Mishing community on the right over the riverine areas. This confrontation later spread across the state with all other communities over all types of cultivable land. To combat with the indiscriminate settlement of these migrants the 'Line System' was introduced by the colonial government in 1920 however in real this system was never fruitful as observed in the Line System Enquiry Committee (LSEC) Report of 1938:

It is not, however only the landholders and leading men among the immigrants who have been convicted of making money out of newcomers, but we heard of many instances of Assamese speculators also... who made large sums of money by selling lands that they had either taken up specially for that purpose or had not taken up at all.

⁸ Chetia, Umesh, *Ahom Burani aru Sanskriti*, 24.

⁹ Gait, *A Brief History of Assam*, 340. Chandra,

¹⁰ Chandra, Bipan. *Essays on Colonialism*, 63.

Table 1. Source: *Census of India, 1931*

Total Districtwise Immigrants to Assam Velly (1911-1931)						
District	1911		1921		1931	
	Moimansing	Total	Moimansing	Total	Moimansing	Total
Goalpara	34,000	77,000	78,000	1,51,000	80,000	1,70,000
kamrup	1,000	8,000	30,000	44,000	91,000	1,34,000
Darrang	1,000	7,000	12,000	20,000	30,000	41,000
Nagaon	1,000	7,000	12,000	20,000	30,000	41,000

The population growth due to the robust settlement pattern of these migrants affected Nagaon district severely after Goalpara where in specific areas of the district the population growth rate almost reached near 300%. S C Mullan the Superintendent of 1931 Census remarked this trend as an 'invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry immigrants', he writes that the immigrants' 'first army corps passed into Assam and conquered the district of Goalpara' and in another 30 years, Mullan predicted that it would not be improbable that 'Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home'.¹⁶

The influx of the east Bengali migrants resulted in continuous extinction of many tribal villages. In 1933 'Tribal League' under the leadership of Bhimbor Deori was formed. The various ethnic groups under the banner of Tribal League were organized only to protect their right over land, language and culture. Such a socio-political disturbance among the ethnic groups of Assam was supplemented primarily by large scale immigration of Muslim agricultural immigrants from the then East-Bengal under the patronage of the British rulers in the pretext of

enhancement of agricultural outputs and land revenue.

**Figure 1.** *Source: Political History of Assam

Sir Syed Sadullah, the leader of the Muslim League-led coalition ministry facilitated a scheme in order to accommodate the Muslim migrant labourers in all the wasteland of Assam with a view to turn Assam a Muslim majority province however this plan faced severe protest and major criticism and could not turn real as planned. Sir Syed Sadullah continued his * The

¹¹ Phukan, Umananda, *The Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam*, 2.

¹² Barpujari (General Editor), *Political History of Assam*, Volume One, 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56

map, which has been incorporated in the book, is prepared under the supervision of Dr. M. Taher. intention to materialize his dream of a Muslim dominated Assam during his second return to power in 1943. Along with a few independent members, Gopinath Bordoloi formed a government on 10 February 1946 with an absolute majority in the legislature.¹⁷ Gopinath Bardoloi -led ministry attempted to protect the tribal interest by creating tribal belts and blocks however this effort was failed to safeguarding tribal interest. The partition later in 1947 turned out to be a major blow to the state in terms of accommodating both Bengali Hindu and Muslim migrants to the state. Though the rate of inflow of the Hindu migrants almost stopped in the subsequent time but the migration of the Bengali speaking Muslim population continued to pour in an alarming rate during the post-independence era.

INFUX AND CONFLICTS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

When Assam tasted the power of Independence under the new constitution of the Union of India it failed significantly to involve the claims and interests of the Bengali minority groups and tribal communities of the soil reflecting a hegemonial attitude. Further the effort to impose Assamese language upon these groups broadened the gap between the Assamese people and these groups to a considerable distance. These attempts of ethnic dominance over minority tribal groups soon turned boomerang to the Assamese people themselves because of the large scale influx of the Bengali Muslim migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan especially after partition which was

facilitated by inability of the union to seal off the Indo-Bangladesh border to check illegal immigration and by various inter-governmental treaties and agreements after the partition and the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.

The first popular movement sparked centralizing the issue of immigration was launched by the All Assam Student Union in 1979. AASU's main demands were:

- (1) The detection of foreign nationals on the basis of the 1951 National Register of Citizens,
- (2) The disenfranchisement of foreigners by removing their names from Assam's electoral rolls, and
- (3) The deportation of foreign nationals.¹⁸

The agitation started in a peaceful manner echoing its voice against economic and political deprivation of the Assamese people in its own soil because of the failure of the state to control migration and illegal influx into Assam. It was considered as a question of survival of the Assamese people caused by the demographic invasion by the illegal Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh. However, during the agitation as well the illegal immigrants continued pour in from Bangladesh stimulating anger of the agitation. This was further fueled by the Central government's decision to conduct election in the state without settling the foreigners issue first along with revising the voters list. The result was devastating as on the first day of¹⁸ Murty, T.S., Assam: The Difficult Years-A Study of Political Developments in 1979-83, 12. election i.e February 14, 1983 violent spread quickly in many areas of the state between the Benagali Muslims and the Assamese speaking tribal which caused the lives of a huge number of Bengali Muslims.

¹⁶Mullan, Census of India, 1931, Vol III.

Table 2. Source: satp.org

Year	Assam	All India	Bangladesh
1901-1911	16.99	5.75	9.1
1911-1921	20.48	-0.31	5.4
1921-1931	19.91	11	7.06
1931-1941	20.4	14.22	17.6
1941-1951	34.98	21.51	0.1
1951-1961	34.95	24.8	29.83
1971-1981	23.8	24.66	31.83
1981-1991	23.8	23.85	22

Nellie Massacre estimates varies from 1200 to 3300. The retaliation later by the Bengali Muslims was done by killing Assamese people. Within a very short span of time the conflict reached a level beyond control but the election still continued and so the ethnic conflicts. Here it is relevant to mention that In *A Philosophy for NEFA (1949)* Verrier Elwin rightly remarks that the first cause of tribal depression was the loss of their land and forests.¹⁸

The Assam Accord was finally signed in 1985 but till date only a handful of foreigners have been identified and deported till date. It is now to the common understanding of all that the main reason for the limited number of deportation of the illegal migrants was an act named Illegal Migrants Detection (By Tribunals) Act, commonly known as IMDT Act. This act came into effect in 1983. 'The Governor is of the opinion that in practice the IMDT is serving the interest of the illegal migrants. He pointed out over a period of 15 years only 9599 illegal migrants have been identified at out of these only 1454 could be deported, IMDT should be replaced by a major just workable and fair

enactment. He suggested of ground survey teams under a Magistrate and asserted by personnel from border organization which will identify the migrants. Magistrates should be from other states then identified persons should be allowed to appear before the foreigners Tribunals. This will provide judicial sametity.'

¹⁸ The intention of the Congress party to give effect to the act was not clear rather suspicious as the act had the following peculiar character. In the first place unlike the Foreigner's Act, 1951, the jurisdiction of the act was limited only to Assam. Secondly, the act put the onus of proof on the complainant. In other words it was the responsibility of the complainant to prove if someone is illegal migrant or not. The act faced severe criticism from all ends as it was now understood that this act was serving none but the Congress to continue their vote bank politics. Finally on 12 July 2005, based on a petition, this act was declared null and void and unconstitutional. Prior to this effort were made to prevent illegal migration in the form of Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 and Prevention of Infiltration to Assam Plan

¹⁷ Goswami, Priyam, *The History of Assam from Yandaboo to Partition, 1826-1947*, 272.

Table 3. Source: Census Report 2011*

C -1 POPULATION BY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY -2011										
Area Name	Total/ Rural/ Urban	Religious communities								
		Total			Hindu			Muslim		
		Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
State - ASSAM	Total	31205576	15939443	15266133	19180759	9796805	9383954	10679345	5463393	5215952
State - ASSAM	Rural	26807034	13678989	13128045	15699871	8006062	7693809	9877218	5052341	4824877
State - ASSAM	Urban	4398542	2260454	2138088	3480888	1790743	1690145	802127	411052	391075

(PIP), 1964.²⁰ However, the earlier act was repealed in 1957 and the later failed because of the Central government's inefficiency and corruption. Today these immigrants play a key Role in electoral politics because of their numerical strength and they are used by the political leaders as vote banks and simultaneously they continued to exert pressure on tribal territories by encroaching tribal lands. The displacement of local ethnic groups caused by this massive influx of East Bengali Muslims helped these migrants to continue their annexation to gain as much land as possible. Loss of large areas of traditional tribal cultivation land in the hands of the land hungry east Bengali farmers turned out to be a serious setback for the tribal peasantry section. To a large extent it was also the tendency of the tribal people to live in isolation that contributed to this setback. Many of them then settle down in the forest areas leaving behind their traditional cultivable land. Today these tribal people are facing eviction threat from government and intense conflict is taking place between the two over the right over the land. On the other hand the annexation of the land reserved for the tribal people continues by the illegal Bengal Muslim peasants.

After Tiwas this danger is largely felt by the Bodos which resulted in a series of

conflict between the two in recent times with a historical context over the right over land and economic security. This conflict between the Bodos and the illegal Muslim settlers dates back to 1952 followed by a series of violence during the Assam Agitation, during the period 1991 to 1994, 2008 and in 2012. Though the immediate reason for the conflict of 2012 was identified as the killing of four Bodo men by the Bangali speaking Muslims in BTAD area but the subsequent violence was the outburst of the anger of the Bodo people resulting out of the social and economic insecurity caused by the illegal migrants. Reportedly 77 people were killed and many thousands people were displaced during the conflict of 2012 between the Bodos and the illegal migrants mainly in the BTAD districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang etc. After the violence there was a massive protest in all parts of the state to identify and deport the illegal migrants to avoid such conflicts in the future.

These conflicts could have been avoided by adequate legislation by the government to economically secure the ethnic groups severely affected by the illegal influx. Lack of time specific and solution oriented and practical legislation to address the ethnic tension is a proper way is a main reason today for the

¹⁸ Elwin, Verrier, A Philosophy of NEFA, 62.

¹⁹ The Assam Tribune, December 15, 1998.

²⁰ Gupta, Shekhar, *Assam: A Valley Divided*, 201.

increasing ethnic conflicts. Central government is also depriving Assam from the economic benefits it should get in comparison to what it produces in terms of natural resources. Rather instead of getting fair share of its development resources from central government state is taking the huge burden of the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants who in turn creating an economic and social turmoil in the state instigating ethnic tension.

WAYS to CONSIDER

The issue of ethnic conflict is multi-dimensional in nature. It is therefore required to be taken care of considering all its major dimensions that could lead to possible policy implication towards resolving the issue. Land being the main bone of contention here is evident to refer to what historian H.K Barpujari observes. He mentions that the immigration from Bangladesh to Assam is inevitable because of the problems of pressure on land, floods and stagnant economy in overpopulated Bangladesh. A possible way to resolve this would be a collaboration of India, Bangladesh and other neighboring countries and agencies to contribute to the growth and development of the economy of Bangladesh. He considered soil conservation, irrigation, and river valley projects of the Psangpo-Brahmaputra-Barak basins for the protection of both the valleys of Assam and Bangladesh from the recurrent floods.²³

The cultivable land mass is narrowing every year in Assam because of soil erosion and invasion of the Bangladeshi immigrants. They are now extending to the reserve forest areas exerting a serious threat to the ecology and

environment of the state. The shrinking land resource of the state and increasing encroachment by the illegal Bangladeshi Muslims explains the basic reason for the ethnic conflict in the state. The economic competition between the indigenous people of the soil of Assam and the Bangladeshi immigrants is tough and many cases it is the tribal ethnic groups standing at the losing end. To deal with the economic rivalry it is therefore the responsibility of the Central Government to take measures for the employment of the ethnic groups in the area of public employment. Along with this it must be mentioned here that for a fruitful solution to this problem is a long term policy protecting the indigenous interest involving measures like reservation of seats in the legislative body is desirable. However, it is the political will at last that matters and determines the future discourse of ethnic problems of the state of Assam.

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