

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BANGLADESHI IMMIGRATION IN INDIA

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(Paper is in the process of completion)

Introduction:

Human groups have a tendency to move towards and settle in the areas of plenty from the areas of scarcity due to economic factors. However, when socio-political aspects are involved, such movements are really of serious consequences. The ever-changing demographic and ethnic composition of people influenced the political and economic set up even before partition of India. Consequences of Bangladeshi immigration in Assam can be viewed in different ways but it cannot be separate from each other. First the tremendous occupation of land by immigrants, second the conflict between indigenous tribal and immigrants due to illegal occupation of land, third the crisis of identity of indigenous population and the fourth is the most important and the recent one, the movement against foreigners. The later one is the most important factors in Assam for its social disruptions and political instabilities and also important from the point of view of different act and law related to immigration and citizenship and electoral roll in the state.

Occupation of Land:

Sir Henry Cotton, Chief commissioner of Assam at the end of nineteenth century found four-fifth of cultivable waste lands untouched by plough. He wanted to cover these lands with food crops. Since, only three percent of the state's population belonged to the working class (Census, 1891-1901) he felt to increase labour supply from the neighbouring areas of the state. The hope of Sir Henry was fulfilled with the completion of Assam-Bengal and Eastern-Bengal (Present Bangladesh) Rail Projects which accelerated inflow of migrants from Bengal. Many of these labourers settle down permanently (Census, 1891& 1901).

Of the cultivators, only a few migrants from the neighbouring districts of East Bengal crossed the boundary and settled down in Sylhet and *char* or riverine lands of the districts of Goalpara. This situation, however, altered at the turn of the century. The pressure on soil, diluvium on their home districts, availability of cheap, plentiful and

fertile lands on easy terms in Assam in places of expensive and uncomfortable holdings as sub-tenants in Bengal drove the immigrants, particularly of the district of Mymensing, to move up into the valley. During 1911-21 an appreciable size of Bangladeshi population was found in all the then four lower middle districts (Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang and Goalpara) (Census, 1921).

According to the Land Revenue Report, during 1930-40, the vast amount of land (6,162 thousand acres) was settled with Bangladeshi immigrants. In the next decade, 1940-50 the area settled was even larger i.e.8,926 thousand acres (Census of India, 1951).¹ The immigrants occupied in organised way wastelands particularly grazing and forest reserves. 'Their hunger for land was so great', remarked the Census Superintendent (1951), 'that the eagerness to grasp as much land as they could cultivate, they not infrequently encroached on government reserves but also on lands belonging to the local people from which they could be evicted only with great difficulty.'² Fearing the possibility of peace the disturbance of Government implemented some rules for the favour of the indigenous population, particularly of tribal people. New comers were not allowed to settle in the areas where tribal people were inhabitants, and lines were drawn on maps of different localities to indicate boundary beyond which immigrants were not allowed to settle. A considerable area had been settled on by immigrants, but the demand for land has continuously out-stripped the progress of ordered settlements and many immigrants occupied lands set apart as professional grazing reserves, where they paid a grazing tax to government. In many areas there were conflicts between tribal people and immigrants, due to capturing of tribal people's land by immigrants. The *Line System*, devised in 1916, was enforced in 1920 in the districts of Nagaon and then subdivision of Kamrup district compelling the migrants to settle in segregate locations. Under the *Line System* lands were divided into three categories: (i) open to immigrants, (ii) close to immigrants, (iii) and where a line was drawn only where they could settle only one side of it. The system was practically successful in restricting indiscriminate occupation, but 'mixed' and 'closed settlements' turned into immigrant settlements mainly because of insincerity and corrupt practices of the settlement officers (Guha, 1977). The *Line System* was opposed by the immigrants and the Government appointed a committee to review the whole system. While emphasising the need to develop extensive wastelands, the committee desired retention of the *Line System* for the protection of tribal settlements. On the resignation of the Coalition Government, Sir Saadullah, who came to

¹Census of India, 1951. Voll. XII, Part. I-A, Report, Assam Manipur and Tripura

power in November 1939, wanted abolition of the *Line System* to encourage settlement of Muslim immigrants to make Assam permanent base of Muslim League.³

In a study conducted regarding the pressure of population on agricultural lands of Karbi Anglong district in Assam by Borah and Sachan, found that the East Bengal (Bangladesh) origin people in the district of Karbi Anglong increased by geometrical progression. From the field evidence, that authors had collected, it was found that the plain dwellers among the Karbi of Howraghat Development Block were forcibly alienated from their fertile cultivable lands by the erstwhile East Bengal immigrants. The Karbi population of this area were economically very weak and taking advantage of this the immigrants manufactured certain devices, by which they could gradually and methodically grab arable lands from the farmer's possession.⁴

Crises of Identity:

Infiltration from East Pakistan has been perceived a great danger to the people of Assam. Various census superintendents have written in census report on the question of immigration into Assam and its dangerous consequences for the Assamese indigenous people and culture.

The Census superintendent (1931) C. S. Mullan wrote in a census report, "Thither flock the Mymensingias, without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staff, a population which must amount to over half million has transplanted itself from Bengal to Assam during the last twenty five years."⁵

Mullan feared⁶ that 'the outcome of this unbridled immigration would be like wiping out the Assamese race and culture more conclusively than the Burmese invasion hundred years ago'. Mullan's prophesy- 'Sibsagar (one of the eastern districts of the southern bank of the Brahmaputra) would ultimately remain the only district where an Assamese race would find a home of its own' -is also not likely to be fulfilled: the former district of Sibsagar has already been 'overrun' by foreigners.⁷

The influx of the immigrants created a crisis of identity among the indigenous Assamese. If the pressure was allowed to continue, they feared, as in the case of Tripura, their economic, political and cultural life would be endangered and their very existence

²"Where Even Mullan Erred", *The Sentinel*, 15 February 1997, Guwahati.

³The *Assam Tribune*, 21 August 1941, Guwahati.

⁴The *Assam Tribune*, 5 June 2000, Guwahati.

⁵Census, 1931, p51.

⁶Census, 1951, xii Part I-A, Report. 73

⁷"Where Even Mullan Erred", *The Sentinel*, 15 February 1997, Guwahati.

would be at stake. The Assamese found that though the immigrants had settled in Assam but most of them were averse to identify themselves with the mainstream and considered themselves as minorities and often looked upon their counterparts elsewhere for inspiration and guidance. Some of them did not even hesitate at times to do harm to the State to suit their interests. The failure of immigrant population to adopt themselves to the local language, customs and traditions had accentuated the identity crisis. 'A proper socialisation process, which alone could have helped to generate understanding among different communities, was frequently impaired in the wake of periodic inter-community clashes and killings and the tendency of each person to continue himself to his own group (Singh.^a, 1984).

Protection of Indigenous Population:

The revised rule of the Assam Educational Department (para. 33) define the permanent resident of Assam as follows:

The term 'permanent resident of Assam' includes the natives of Assam and those domiciled therein. A person shall be deemed to have acquirement of Rule 307 (2) of Assam Executive Manual.⁸ Where the conditions of Rule 307 (2) of Assam Executive Manual are fulfilled the district level authority will give the certificate of domicile. If in any case there is any doubt that a person is not belong to a native family, or domicile in Assam, in such cases he/she should be made a reference to the government for his/her prove.

The definition of indigenous people of Assam has now created controversy in the state after the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) sought reservation of seats in the Parliament and state Assembly, and local bodies for the indigenous people. But the state and the central governments had accepted a definition of indigenous people way back in 1951 during the census operations and that definition can still be used. According to the report of the 1951 census, the census statistics were collected

⁸Rule 307 (2) of the Assam Executive Manual : (1) Save with the previous sanction of the Government, appointments are limited to the member of families native of or domiciled in Assam. If in any case it is desired to appoint a person who is not a member of such a family, to a post whether permanent or temporary, an application for sanction should be submitted to the government before the appointed is made. (2) It has been laid down as a working principle that in the absence of any special rule governing any particular case or class of case, a man who is not native of the province shall be deemed to be domicile in the province only when he has become the owner of homestead (home or land) in the province, and has already lived in that homestead for ten years and intend to live in their until he dies. The children of such a man will automatically be domiciled in Assam unless and until they clearly show their intention of reverting to the country from where the family came.

through a set of 14 questions framed on all-India basis. The report said that the question number 13 was left to be framed by the state governments to accommodate any special requirement which they might have. Accordingly, the question framed by the Assam government was - "are you an indigenous person of Assam, if so, state the land you own and the land you have rented in cash or kind from others." According to the report, the Assam government gave a proper definition of the indigenous people. As per the definition given by the Assam government, "the indigenous person of Assam means a person belonging to the state of Assam and speaking the Assamese language or any tribal dialect of Assam or in the case of Cachar, the language (Bengali) of the region." The census operation also included the definition of land owned and land rented by the indigenous people. "The land owned means land held directly under the government under permanent settlement or under periodic or special lease. The land rented means the land held by a person which is under another person on payment of rent in cash, kind or service under an agreement, written or verbal". In fact, the 1951 census report had district wise break up of the land owned or rented by the indigenous people of the state. The state government of Manipur and Tripura also adopted the question with slight modification. Later on, clarification given by the then revenue minister and then the Chief Minister Bishnu Ram Medhi was conveyed to all 'charge superintendents'. As per the instructions, the people, whose mother tongue was not Assamese, but spoke Assamese at least as their subsidiary language, would be recorded as Assamese. The instruction was so worded as not to insist on anyone speaking Assamese or any tribal dialect at home or as their mother tongue, the report said. The report has mentioned that some persons in the then Goalpara division insisted on recording their mother tongue, as Goalparia and such persons were included as indigenous. Later on all such persons were included as Assamese after the tabulation was completed, the report of 1951 census added. According to AASU adviser, Sri Samujjal Bhattacharya ASSU has taken the same stated that the census is carried out under the Union Home Ministry, Central government, at that time, had accepted the definition of the state government on indigenous people. Therefore, there should not be any controversy now regarding the definition of indigenous people. He said that the political parties, who are creating controversy on the issue, are only doing so for gaining political mileage. He also asserted that the AASU would never compromise on the issue of reservation for

indigenous people as the issue is related to the identity of the indigenous people of Assam.⁹

Language Problem:

The British, on assuming power in Assam took two important steps that have left deep scars on the politics of Assam. The first was systematic exclusion of the Ahom aristocracy from the portals of power and the second employment of large number of Hindu Bengalis in low profile jobs of the East India Company. These Bangladeshis brought with them not only their language and culture but also ethnic arrogance with disastrous consequences for Assam. For absolutely no rhyme or reason, the British rule made Bengali the official language of Assam in 1837 and it continued to remain as the official language for next 35 years. This decision of British rulers did incalculable harm to the cause of peaceful relationship among Assamese and Bengalis and the relation between these two have never been cordial ever since. It may be mentioned here that Assamese and Bengali are totally different languages although they are written in the same script. This imposition of Bengali language over the Assamese language has been attributed to a British official Francis Jenkins who had taken the decision and wrote: “*It was I who was at the root of the advice in favour of introducing Bengali. It was my order that Robinson carried out*” (Chattopadhyay, 1988). The motive of British was not against the Assamese language by imposing Bengali language, but they wanted to satisfy those Bengali immigrants workers, who was working for their company to get better work from these workers.

This not only gave a serious setback to the growth of Assamese language but had other consequences too. So, even when Assamese was restored to its original status in 1872, facilities for teaching Bengali had to be provided in school if twelve or more student requested to use Bengali. This gave rise to conflict over the medium of instruction in schools and colleges of Assam which spilled over the next century resulting in enervating conflicts between the rival regional chauvinism based on the religion, culture and language (Rai, 1993).

The Assam Domiciled and Settlers Association (Assam Citizens Association), a middle class Bengali association, in the meeting at Nagaon district, 24 March, 1940, demanded for equal right of education through the medium of one’s mother tongue.¹⁰

⁹The *Assam Tribune*, Wednesday, 3 May 2000, Guwahati.

Already, educated Assamese had to face keen competition for job and business with the newcomers whether the Hindus or Muslims. Naturally, they apprehended that at no future while they would be swamped ‘by sheer number of immigrant Muslims’, their language and culture would be obligated in a predominantly Bengali State. Bengali factor is still real and the apprehension of the Assamese intelligentsia that the immigrants Muslims who have already declared Assamese as their mother tongue are likely to declare Bengali in near future. However, some such fears are at present imaginary than real inasmuch as the numbers of Bengali Hindus are on decline. With the spread of education and growing awareness of the government more and more locals are occupying government jobs, even key posts, and directing their attention to other avenues of employment. Assamese men of letters, their language and literature, art and culture have of late received due recognition and admiration even from the luminaries of Bengal. The bogey of political domination of the Assamese by the immigrants Muslims, however, still persists but there is hardly any possibility of political unity between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims. ‘The hostility to each other is far greater than their shared antagonism to the Assamese (Weiner, 1978). In regards to the declaration of Bengali as mother tongue by the immigrants, the scholar himself admits that community’s future lies in a closer tie with the Assamese way of life and language. Economic consideration and the limited socialisation between the two communities over the last century should make it feasible.

The 1971 census showed that the increase, the percentage of Bengali-speaking people was on the decline (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of Assamese and Bengali speaking population to total population

Language\Year	1931	1951	1971	1991
Assamese	31.4	56.7	60.89	57.29
Bengali	30.06	20.99	19.71	21.51

Source: *Census*, 1971.

However it is observed that

¹⁰The *Assam Tribune*, 24 March 1940, Guwahati.

*While Bengali Hindu always returned Bengali and nothing else as their mother tongue, Bengali Muslim immigrants into Assam Valley, on the other hand, have a tendency to return Assamese as their mother tongue even in the pre-independence days because what they want is land in the valley and if knowledge of Assamese can help them to become indigenous, they do not mind about their mother tongue. After independence the Bengali Muslim immigrants in to Assam Valley have, almost to a man, returned their mother tongue as Assamese whether they know the language or not.*¹¹

During the decade 1961-1971, the rate of increase of Assamese speaking population was 31.77 percent, much higher than the natural rate of increase (Das. 1989). It is sometime maintained that high increase of the Assamese speaking population does not generally represent an actual increase in the number of original Assamese speaking people, and that the increase is due to adoption of Assamese language by people speaking other languages. The adoption of Assamese language was a continuous process by the Bengali immigrants till the half of the nineteenth century. But the process is still continuing by those Bangladeshi immigrants who came to Assam even in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

After long time Home Ministry has published a Language Statistics in 1991, which gives only state level figures. This report shows that during last twenty years the tribal languages (dialogues) in Assam have increased normally in spite of emphasise given by tribal people to their language. In 1961 and 1971 censuses most of the indigenous tribal people have reported their mother tongue as Assamese. Around six hundred thousands of indigenous tribals, who earlier reported Assamese as their mother tongue, in 1991 census reported their own language or dialogue as their mother tongue. Therefore, the rate of Assamese-speaking people during 1971 - 1991 should have been less than 45.52; but due to the reporting of Assamese as their mother tongue in 1991 census by the new Muslim immigrants and many tea garden labourers, the rate of increase of Assamese-speaking population remain normal.¹²

¹¹Census, 1961, p204. The striking increase in the percentage of Assamese population has been attributed by R.B. Vaghaiwalla, census Superintendent 1951, partly to 'aggressive Linguistic nationalism' in the Bramaputra Valley (census 1961, p203) which is baseless as has been shown by his succession in 1961. With unabated inflow of immigrants, it is true, there has been a crisis of identity of the indigenous Assamese.

¹²*Amar Asom* (Assamese daily news paper), 19 January 1998, Guwahati.

As the matter of fact, in the *census* of 1931 when the linguistic tabulation was recorded, the district of Sylhet was an integral part of Assam having nearly a quarter of Bengali-speaking of the total population. The separation of Sylhet in 1947 and the desire of Muslim immigrants like the tea tribes to adopt Assamese as mother tongue in the land of their adoption, the number of Assamese-speaking rose from 31.4 percent in 1931 to 56.7 percent in 1951-52. The immigrant Muslims identified themselves linguistically and culturally and returned their mother tongue as Assamese in successive censuses although they continued to speak their own language in their home.¹³

Besides encroaching lands and affecting the identity of indigenous population fresh immigrants are reported to have committed various other acts of lawlessness, creating tension among the indigenous people. In the last quarter of this century, problems associated with Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants turned towards another dimension. Assam has experienced many religious conflicts, large-scale violence and communal riots between Muslim immigrants and local people and a complete breakdown of law and order situation in the state. It also resulted into a large-scale agitation by the student against the foreign nationals, particularly against those Bangladeshi Muslims who illegally stay in the state. It has not only affected the socio-cultural, economic and political situation in the state, but has also affected adversely the academic environment.

Socio-Political Instability Caused by Illegal Immigration:

The incident that marked the beginning of the ongoing strife in Assam was a parliamentary by-election to the Mangaldoi constituency called for in March 1979 due to death of the incumbent MP during a routine revision of election rolls, which was published on 20th April 1979. Objection were raised against some 70,000 names being of Bangladeshi nationals (Singh,^b 1984). It is to be noted here that the previous election revision had been done in 1977 at the time of general election, substantiating the fact that the mass arrival of migrants had taken place in the late 1970's. Due to the public protest, by election could not take place in Mangaldoi. Soon thereafter the country went for national election in the beginning of 1980 and chief election commissioner of India refused to delete the controversial names from the voter's list.

The failure of the government to respond to the issue led to the agitation by the Assamese under the leadership of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP)

¹³Census, 1961,p254-255.

and All Assam Student's Union (AASU). To counter the offensive, Bangladeshi immigrants organized themselves, which led to one of the most extreme examples of inter-group conflict in the early 1980s. Assam witnessed governmental instability, sustained civil disobedience campaigns, and some of the worst cases of ethnic violence. The situation became so volatile that on 2nd February 1980, AASU submitted a memorandum to the Indian Prime Minister to shoot down the Bangladeshi migrants.¹⁴

The formation of a congress government in Assam led by an Assamese Muslim, Anawara Taimur in December 1980 brought further confrontation among native Assamese Hindus and migrant Muslim Bangladeshis. The increasing violence forced the fall of Taimur government and central rule was imposed in Assam in June 1981. Congress party at the centre, in an attempt to limit the damage, brought in an ethnic Assamese Hindu, Keshab Gogoi as the new Chief Minister in January 1982 but his reign did not survive more than two months. Once again, from March 1982 Assam came under direct central rule. By the beginning of 1983 it was reported that the capital of Assam, Guwahati and most of the townships in the Brahmaputra valley were turned into virtual armed camps. Para-military forces were flown in from other parts of India to strengthen the hands of government (Baruah, 1986).

In February 1983, in spite of explosive atmosphere, the ruling Congress Party at the Centre went for state legislature election with the intention of winning the contest with the support of the immigrants. The native organisations called for a boycott and resisted the balloting. Congress won an easy majority and formed the government in Assam but its price was frightening. The violence between the native Assamese and migrants Bangladeshis costed more than 3000 lives. Few days before the election, more than 8000 native Hindu Assamese surrounded a village called Nellie and systematically killed the Bangladeshi Muslim migrants. The toll of the five-hour rampage was more than 1700 (Hazarika, 1993).

Rajiv Gandhi, after becoming the Prime Minister of India in 1984, made an earnest effort to bring a peaceful solution to the Assam problem. He accepted the demands of the Assam Movement leaders while signing an accord with them in August 1985. In this accord, it was agreed to disenfranchise and expel the migrants,

¹⁴This information was provided by Debo P. Barooah who was spokesperson of the anti-foreigners' movement in Assam and later became Vice Chancellor of Guwahati University, in his interview with Ashok Swain (Author of "The Environmental Trap: The Ganga River Diversion, Bangladeshi Migration and Conflicts in india") on 28 December 1993.

those who had arrived after 1970s. Exactly two months after the signing of the Accord, the Movement leaders formed a political party, known as Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) to contest the next election (Hazarika, 1988). Bangladeshi Muslim migrants in Assam, feeling betrayed by the Congress Party and in order to resist onslaught of AGP, formed a political organisation under the banner of United Minorities Front (UMF) to fight the state election in December 1985 (Walter, 1991). Their withdrawal of support from Congress led to the defeat of the Congress Party and AGP captured the power in Assam. However, due to inefficiency and factionalism, AGP could not fulfil its election pledge of identify the foreign nationals in the state.¹⁵ The non-co-operation of the Congress government at the Centre in its efforts to win back the Muslim migrants to its fold, was another reason for AGP's failure.

This two-pronged strategy of Congress to defame AGP and to win back the Muslim migrants, paid back handsomely in the 1990 election and it came back in to power. The pro-migrants policies of the new Congress government also led to the gradual demise of the UMF. Yet, the seriousness of the situation forced the Congress Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia to acknowledge in the Budget Session of the State Assembly on 10 April 1992 about the large-scale illegal migration from foreign land to his state. This change of tone again brought the migrants together and in May 1992, they floated a new organisation, Muslim Forum, and in its first convention at Guwahati issued political threats to the Chief Minister. The political power of migrants in Assam can be gauged from the fact that the chief Minister decided to withdraw his statement in a public meeting in the migrant-dominated district of Nagaon on 7th June 1992 by saying, "there were no illegal migrants in Assam".¹⁶ According to an Assamese journalist, " Bangladeshi Muslims have now become the king-maker and king-breaker in Assam (Swain, 1996).

¹⁵Many Assamese who were involved in the anti-foreigners' movement and supported AGP come to power are quite angry over the failure of Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and his AGP Ministry in dealing with the migration issue. D.N. Bezboruah, one of the highly responded journalist in Assam and the Editor of *The Sentinel* in his interview with Ashok Swain (Author of "The *Environmental Trap: The Ganga River Diversion, Bangladeshi Migration and Conflicts in india*") on 27 December 1993 did not hesitate to describe Mr. Mahanta and his party as " unmitigated disasters for the State of Assam", In: Ashok Swain "*The Environmental Trap: The Ganga River Diversion, Bangladeshi Migration and Conflicts in India*" Report No. 41, p. 98, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 1996, Sweden.

¹⁶*Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 July 1992, Bombay. 1593.

AGP took a strong exception to the Chief Minister's withdrawal of a statement outside the House, which he had originally made in the floor of the State Assembly.¹⁷ However, the Congress Chief Minister of Assam came under heavy pressure from the Muslim migrant community when his party's general secretaries from the five northeastern states submitted a report to the Seventh General Conference of the Northeastern co-ordination committee on 3 July 1992 to take actions against the migration from Bangladesh.¹⁸ Similar to this Report, another Report was presented by the General Secretaries of Congress (I) Co-ordination Committee at the Eighth General Conference (Special) at Dimapur in Nagaland on 22 June 1993.¹⁹ Congress Party representative from Assam had been forced by the other units of Northeastern state to support their anti-migration stance, as it was very essential for their self-protection. The Assam Congress Party endorsed these Reports with its Northeastern counterparts, but at the same time due to political compulsion at home, it denounced the corresponding position by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as an expression of 'rank of communalism' (Prabhakara, 1993). To further appease the Muslim migrants, the Congress of Assam took unusual step in denouncing the Tezpur Army Headquarters' Press Release, which has shown concern for the spread of Muslim fundamentalism among the migrants.²⁰

Due to uncertain atmosphere, many Muslim migrants from Bangladesh were hesitant to rely on a relatively moderate organisation like Muslim Forum for their protection in Assam. A purely militant group namely Assam Minority Liberation Army (AMLA) with recruits from the fresh migrants came into operation with its head office at Kharupetia in the early 1992.²¹ At the time of post-Ayodhya communal violence in India in December 1992, in the Nagaon district of Assam, the Muslim migrants under AMLA were strong enough to engineer a brutal massacre evidently aimed at driving out Hindus from their land.²² It brought national attention to Assam.

¹⁷Reacting to the issue, AGP leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta says, "Saikia (The Chief Minister) is dependent upon the foreigners' vote - so he did this." Interview with Prafulla K. Mahanta with Ashok Swain, In: Ashok Swain "*The Environmental Trap: The Ganga River Diversion, Bangladeshi Migration and Conflicts in India*" Report No. 41, p. 90, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 1996, Sweden.

¹⁸The Report of the General Secretary of the Congress (I) to the Seventh General Conference of the North-eastern Co-ordination Committee, 3 July 1992, Part 3, Guwahati.

¹⁹*Indian Express*, 21 July 1993, New Delhi.

²⁰Tezpur is a District Head Quarter in Assam and Hosts a Major Army Base. *Indian Express*, 16 February 1994, New Delhi.

²¹Information received from G.S. Kalita, Assistant Editor of Assam based English Daily *The Sentinel*.

²²*The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 20 December 1992. See, *The Statesman*, 21 December 1992, Calcutta.

For instance, with the help of this incident, BJP tried to divert the nation's attention from the party's alleged role in demolishing Ayodhya mosque.²³

Serious violence occurred in Assam in July 1984, when a militant from a native Assamese Bodo tribal group clashed with Bangladeshi Muslim migrants in the Barpeta area. About 3,500 migrants families were affected by the violence and 1,500 people were forced to shelter in relief camps.²⁴ In spite of presence of Chief Minister in the troubled area, Bodo militants managed to attack a relief camp in Bansbari and killed 60 Muslim migrants in the mid-night of 23 July 1994.²⁵ The Indian Army was called in to restore the situation. The failure of the State Government in protecting the migrants was severely criticised by the Muslim migrant community. To solve the situation, the Chief Minister of Assam initiated various pro-migrants policies to bring back their confidence.²⁶ The Assam Unit of the Congress Party even went on opposing "totally" the Chief Election Commissioner of India's order of 8 December 1994 for an intensive revision of the electoral rolls of the state.²⁷

The failure of AGP²⁸, the pro-migrants policies of the Congress and the increasing strength of the Muslim migrants provided opportunities for Hindu fundamentalist political organisations. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and militant organisation like Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) are working hard to organize Assamese Hindus on the migration issue. The slogan "Bring BJP, Save Assam" could be found written in almost every corner of Assam, but the party was primarily concentrated on the migrant dominated area to attract the support of Native Hindu Assamese.²⁹ RSS started setting a number of *Vidya Bharati* schools in the interior

²³BJP's then President Dr. M.M. Joshi in an interview with an news paper, while justifying the destruction of the mosque, in the same tongue he alleged that "Bangladeshi infiltrators were responsible for the massacre of Hindus in Assam and the Government should take note of the disastrous consequences of allowing these infiltrators to play havoc with the country's social fabric." *Indian Express*, 19 January 1993, New Delhi.

²⁴*Indian Express* (New Delhi), 23 July 1994. IN the same day editorial, the news paper describe: "The immediate provocation for the ethnic violence in Assam's Barpeta district is obscure and will probably remain so. Almost anything can provide the spark to the powder-keg of ethnic animosities and suspicion that part of lower Assam have become...The new element in the latest clashes is that some Bengali Muslims, have taken steps to protect themselves by organising and acquiring arms."

²⁵*Indian Express* (New Delhi), 25 July 1994.

²⁶*Indian Express* (New Delhi), 12 September 1994& 16 September 1994.

²⁷The Hindu (Madras), 21 January 1995.

²⁸AGP usually comes out in the local press, criticising the pro-migrant policies of the Congress Government, e.g., *The Sentinel* (Guwahati), 21 December 1993. Interestingly, there has been report also that AGP, which had come to power in Assam in 1985 on the strength of a sustained six year agitation against illegal migration, is considering to shift its political stance and start wooing the Bangladeshi migrants to its fold for electoral reason. *The Times of India* (New Delhi), 31 December 1993.

²⁹For instance, the Assam unit of BJP held its State Executive meeting at migrant dominated

areas of Assam to teach the students the Hinduised version of history and is also using the schools for its membership recruitment. The senior functionary of RSS describe the stance of their organization over the Muslim migration issue: “It is silent invasion of our country by foreigners-it is cultural, political, it is total invasion. It is global Muslim conspiracy with the help of Bangladeshi government..... We are making Hindus conscious- telling to arise, awake and organise (Swain, 1996)*.

Consequences of Illegal Immigration on Electoral Roll:

There is a tremendous increase of number of voters in the second half of the twentieth century. This abnormal increase in voter numbers cannot be contributed only by the natural growth of population, there has to be high scale in-migration or immigration. Table 2 shows that in a period of 40 years from 1957 to 1997, the number of voters in Assam increased by 217.62 percent. In a conference on 24–26 September 1978, The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India emphasised about the increase of voters in Assam and also said the probable reason as the existence of foreign nationals in the state (Mahanta, 1986).

Table 2 shows the total numbers of voters, their absolute increase, percentage increase and total percentage increase for different years between 1957 to 1997. In 1957, the total number of voters was 44,49,359 and after five years it has increased by 10%. In next four years, in 1966 it has increased 12.99%, which is higher than the previous period, though the time period is one year less. For the first 20 years, from 1957 to 1977, increase of voters was not that much high, little more than 60% of additional voters were added. During the later 20 years, from 1977 to 1997 it has increased very rapidly, more than 150% of additional voters were added. In the year 1978, there was a surprising increase of voters, within a year 7,44,933 additional voters were added, which is more than 10% increase of the previous figures. From 1979 to 1990, in eleven years, increase in the number of voters was not as high as in previous and later period which may be the result of anti foreigners movement from 1979 to 1985, or the implementation of the IM (DT) Act in 1983. The highest increase has been recorded in the year 1997 when adding almost 1.7 million additional voters have been added. In 1996 parliamentary election the

Nagaon Town of Nagaon district of Assam on 6-7 November 1993, where it also made the first of its resolutions against Bangladeshi ‘infiltrators’. See, The Press Release of the Baharatiya Janata Party, Assam Pradesh, Dated 9 November 1993.

* Shrikrishna Motlag, Zonal Organiser of RSS, East Zone (West Bengal, Assam, Sikkim, North-Eastern States, Andaman & Nicobar) talked to the author of *The Environmental Trap: The Ganga River Diversion, Bangladeshi Migration and Conflicts in India*, Ashok Swain in an

number of voters was around 12.5 million, which has increased to around 14.3 million in the next year. Within a year from 1996 to 1997, 13.49% of voters have increased.

Table 2: Number of electors and its absolute and percentage increase from 1957 to 1997 in Assam

Year	Number of electors	Absolute increase	Percentage of increase	Total percentage increase
1957	44,93,359			
1962	49,42,816	4,49,457	10 (in 5 years)	10.00 (in 5 years)
1966	55,85,056	6,42,240	12.99 (in 4 years)	24.30 (in 9 years)
1970	57,01,805	1,16,749	2.09 (in 4 years)	26.89 (in 13 years)
1971	62,96,198	5,94,393	10.42 (in 6 years)	40.12 (in 14 years)
1977	72,29,543	9,33,345	10.82 (in 6 years)	60.89 (in 20 years)
1978	79,74,476	7,44,933	10.30 (in 1 years)	77.49 (in 21 years)
1979	85,37,497	5,63,021	7.06 (in 1 years)	90.00 (in 22 years)
1990	112,02,552	26,65,055	31.22 (in 11 years)	149.31 (in 33 years)
1991	118,93,565	6,91,013	6.17 (in 1 years)	164.69 (in 34 years)
1994	122,64,839	3,71,274	3.12 (in 3 years)	172.95 (in 37 years)
1996	125,75,854	3,11,015	2.47 (in 2 years)	179.88 (in 39 years)
1997	142,71,859	16,96,005	13.49 (in 1 years)	217.62 (in 40 years)

Source: The Election Commission India, Election Department, Guwahati, Assam.

The increase in the numbers of voters in Assam is the highest in India. During the last fourteen years (1983-1997) number of voters has increased hundred percent in the state. The Election Department is not able to give any final conclusion about this high rate of increase of voters. All Assam Students Union (ASSU) is protesting against this tremendous increase of voters in Assam. ASSU has criticised that political parties are using illegal immigrants as this vote bank. On the other hand, Minority Front says that, this high rate of increase is due to inclusion of those minority people whose names were not included in previous voter list revision.³⁰

In a period of one and half years the number of voters have increased more than 1.6 millions (13.38%) in Assam. Based on the latest (1998) voter list revision, the Deputy Election Commissioner of Assam says that, in 1996 Parliamentary election the number of voters was 12,587,659 and in 1998 election it has increased to 14,272,244 or

undisclosed location in the Eastern part of India on 28 December 1993.

³⁰ *Asomiya Pratidin* (Assamese daily newspaper), 16 January 1998, Guwahati.

by 13.38%. Even though he did not say that this tremendous increase in voters numbers is due to large-scale illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, but he did not denied about the in-disciplinary things during the revision of voter list.

Revisions of Voters List and Doubtful Voters:

When the draft electoral rolls were published in July 1997, objections and doubts were raised by police and private individuals about 1.801 million people and their citizenship was questioned. After verification, the Electoral Registration Officers accepted the claims of 1.231million people as Indian citizens. But they were “not satisfied and had reasonable doubts” about the claims of 0.313 million people. Their cases were referred to different tribunals under the Foreigners’ Act and the IM (DT) Act. In November 1997, the Election Commission directed the “provisional inclusion” of these 0.313 million people in the electoral rolls with the rider that “before final publication, the letter ‘D’ be indicated against the names of these persons to denote the fact that their citizenship is doubtful/disputed and is pending adjudication before the Tribunals.” Finally, in January 1998, the Commission ordered that these people were debarred from casting their votes in the elections for the 12th Lok Sabha. Their petitions were then filed before the Guwahati High Court challenging the impugned order of the Commission. In March 1998, the Commission sought the transfer of the petitions from the Guwahati High Court to the Supreme Court. On May 4, 1998, the Supreme Court admitted the petition of the Election Commission and asked those who had challenged the Commission’s order in the Guwahati High Court to show cause why their petitions should not be transferred to the apex court. The case is pending before the Supreme Court and the status of these 0.313 million people is yet to be decided. Mr. H.R.A. Choudhury, general secretary of the United Minorities’ Front (UMF) and one of the petitioners, said that they had not vigorously pursued the case in the Supreme Court as no elections, for either the Lok Sabha or the State Assembly, seemed to be in the offing.³¹

Current Political Talks on the Consequences of Illegal Immigration:

The exceptional growth of population of Assam is catching the eye of even government. Chief Minister of Assam on March14, 2000 said in the Assembly that the growth of population in the State was much higher than the national average and

³¹*The Hindu*, Sunday, 2 May 1999, New Delhi.

attributed it to unabated infiltration. In reply to discussion on budget, the Chief Minister said the per capita income in the State had nose-dived because of abnormal growth of population sparked by infiltration from across the border. The Chief Minister however informed that construction of roads and fencing along the Indo-Bangla border would be completed within the year as the State Government has mounted pressure on the Centre for the purpose³².

According to a note of the Home Ministry, infiltration is encouraged by some political and religious elements. It should not be forgotten that all the infiltrators belong to the fertile age group and the number of Indian-born Children of Bangladeshi couples illegally staying in India is virtually unchecked. In the border districts of Assam, Bihar and West Bengal there is a high concentration of infiltrators and a large number of them got their names enrolled in the voter's list as a protective measure. According to the 1991 census, the Muslim population in five border districts of Assam was more than fifty percent³³

However, beside these above discussed consequences, many Muslim insurgency organisations came up in the state, which are involved in different criminal and anti social activities, such as, kidnapping, killing, stilling and extortion etc. They are now in a mood to launch a secessionist movement, as their sole aim is to carve out an Islamic province. According to a report available with intelligence agencies at present 15 Islamic militant out fits are operating in the region, even though most of these organisations are currently in their infancy they are immediate threat to the security in the region.³⁴

³²The Assam Tribune, Wednesday, 15 March, 2000, Guwahati.

³³*The Hindustan Times*, 10 September, 1998, New Delhi.

³⁴*The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, September 3, 1998.