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Dr. Madan Chandra Boro
Associate Professor
& H.O.D, Political Science
Kumar Bhaskar Varma
Sanskrit and Ancient Studies
University, Nalbari, Assam,
India

Indigeneity and immigration in Assam: Historical roots, ethnic assertion, and political responses

Madan Chandra Boro

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Abstract

This study explores the complex interplay between indigeneity and immigration in Assam, focusing on historical, socio-political, and policy dimensions. It traces patterns of immigration into the region and assesses their impact on the indigenous communities' identity and socio-political dynamics. The research investigates how various ethnic and tribal groups define and assert indigeneity in response to demographic and cultural shifts. Furthermore, it critically evaluates the influence of political movements and state policies particularly the NRC and CAA on shaping public discourse and institutional responses. The study offers a nuanced understanding of the tensions, aspirations, and negotiations that define Assam's contemporary political landscape.

Keywords: Assam, indigeneity, immigration, ethnic assertion, NRC, CAA, political movements, tribal identity, socio-political impact, historical migration

1. Introduction

Indigeneity, immigration, and politics in Assam are deeply interconnected, profoundly shaping the region's socio-political fabric. Indigenous communities such as the Ahoms, Bodos, and other tribal groups have long expressed anxieties over cultural erosion, land alienation, and political marginalization, primarily due to continuous immigration from Bangladesh (Baruah, 1999; Hussain, 2000) ^[1, 6]. A widespread fear among these groups is the potential loss of their demographic dominance and cultural identity, prompting movements like the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) and the popularization of slogans such as "*Jati, Mati, Bheti*" denoting identity, land, and home (Sharma, 2011) ^[10].

Immigration has not only transformed the social landscape but also significantly influenced electoral dynamics. The demographic shifts have altered voting patterns, contributing to the rise of identity-based politics and the emergence of regional parties like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which capitalized on the sentiments of ethnic Assamese communities (Weiner, 1983) ^[11]. National political parties, meanwhile, have often employed immigration narratives strategically during elections, at times exacerbating communal divisions for political gain (Misra, 2014) ^[7].

Recent developments such as the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have further polarized public opinion. While some view these mechanisms as necessary tools to safeguard indigenous interests, others interpret them as discriminatory policies targeting specific religious or ethnic groups (Goswami, 2020) ^[5]. The ongoing demand for constitutional safeguards under Clause 6 of the Assam Accord underscores the persistent call for protection of indigenous rights and identity (Saikia, 2019) ^[8].

Unresolved immigration issues continue to manifest in widespread protests, policy paralysis, and protracted legal proceedings in Foreigners Tribunals, keeping the state in a state of socio-political flux. Thus, the complex interplay of indigeneity, immigration, and political maneuvering remains central to Assam's identity crisis and challenges in governance (Baruah, 2020) ^[2].

1.1 Meaning of Terms

The terms *indigeneity*, *immigration*, and *politics in Assam* encompass the interlinked issues that have shaped the state's identity, governance, and social dynamics for decades.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Madan Chandra Boro
Associate Professor
& H.O.D, Political Science
Kumar Bhaskar Varma
Sanskrit and Ancient Studies
University, Nalbari, Assam,
India

(Baruah, 1999; Hussain, 2000) ^[1, 6]. Indigeneity refers to the status of Assam's original inhabitants such as the Ahoms, Bodos, Karbis, Misings, and other tribal and ethnic communities who have historically inhabited the region. These groups seek recognition and constitutional safeguards to protect their language, culture, land rights, and political representation, while expressing concern about marginalization due to demographic shifts driven by immigration (Sharma, 2011; Saikia, 2019) ^[9, 8].

Immigration into Assam largely pertains to the influx of migrants from present-day Bangladesh. This migration began during British colonial rule, intensified after the Partition in 1947, and peaked following the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 (Weiner, 1983; Hussain, 2000) ^[11, 6]. While many migrants were refugees escaping persecution, a significant number also arrived as economic migrants. This large-scale population movement has generated persistent concerns over illegal immigration, encroachment on indigenous lands, and the perceived dilution of Assam's cultural identity (Baruah, 2020; Goswami, 2020) ^[2, 5].

Politics in Assam is intricately shaped by the tensions between indigeneity and immigration. These issues sparked major political movements such as the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), which ultimately led to the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, promising detection and deportation of illegal immigrants and protection of indigenous rights (Misra, 2014) ^[7]. The debate has intensified in recent years with the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). While some view these measures as necessary safeguards for indigenous identity, others argue they undermine secularism and threaten the rights of religious and linguistic minorities (Goswami, 2020; Saikia, 2019) ^[5, 8]. Thus, politics in Assam remains deeply rooted in complex questions of identity, citizenship, and equitable distribution of resources, with indigeneity and immigration continuing to define the contours of its political discourse and governance challenges (Baruah, 2020) ^[2].

1.2 Background of the problem

The movement for entity in Assam embodies a powerful "sons-of-the-soil" sentiment, rooted in fears of losing indigenous identity, rights, and resources amidst sustained immigration. It gained prominence during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), where the slogan became a symbol of resistance against what was perceived as the demographic threat posed by illegal migration from Bangladesh (Baruah, 1999; Hussain, 2000) ^[1, 6]. The phrase encapsulated the collective call to protect *jati* (indigenous identity), *mati* (ancestral land), and *bheti* (home/foundation) from external encroachment that was believed to endanger the ethno-cultural integrity and political future of the Assamese people (Sharma, 2011) ^[10].

This movement subsequently evolved into a dominant political narrative, deeply influencing the formation and ideology of regional parties such as the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), and later the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), which championed the cause of indigenous rights and cultural preservation (Misra, 2014) ^[7]. The core argument behind this "sons of the soil" ideology asserts that the indigenous population should have primary access to land, employment, and state resources. It has also driven continued demands for constitutional safeguards, notably through the implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam

Accord, which promises protections for Assamese cultural, linguistic, and political rights (Saikia, 2019; Goswami, 2020) ^[8, 5]. In this context, policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have been widely contested, as many Assamese view them as threats to their cultural identity and existence, exacerbating regional identity politics and resistance to national integration efforts (Baruah, 2020) ^[2].

Migration into Assam, however, is not a new phenomenon it has unfolded in distinct phases across centuries, each reshaping the state's demographic, cultural, and political landscape. During the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, Assam was largely inhabited by indigenous groups such as the Ahoms, Bodos, Karbis, and other tribal communities, who established unique socio-political and cultural systems (Sharma, 2011) ^[10]. Significant demographic changes began under British colonial rule, when the administration encouraged large-scale migration from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to cultivate the fertile plains of the Brahmaputra valley and maximize land revenue (Gohain, 2018) ^[4].

Following the Partition in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, Assam experienced new waves of migration comprising both refugees fleeing religious persecution and economic migrants seeking livelihood opportunities (Weiner, 1983; Dutta, 2021) ^[11, 3]. These successive inflows led to widespread concerns among the indigenous Assamese about the erosion of their linguistic and cultural identity, shrinking land access, and diminishing political representation (Baruah, 2020) ^[2].

Despite efforts to regulate and address these issues through instruments like the Assam Accord (1985), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), migration remains a persistent and polarizing issue in contemporary Assam (Goswami, 2020; Sharma, 2019) ^[5, 9]. These mechanisms have done little to ease anxieties surrounding indigeneity and citizenship, and the debate continues to dominate Assam's electoral politics and policy-making landscape. Ultimately, the question of migration in Assam reflects a complex intersection of colonial legacies, humanitarian crises, and contested nationhood in the modern Indian state.

1.3 Research Context

The context of this research lies within the complex and often contentious interplay between immigration, indigeneity, and identity politics in Assam. Historically, the state has experienced multiple waves of migration, beginning with movements from East Bengal during the colonial period and continuing with large-scale influxes from present-day Bangladesh, particularly after the Partition of 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 (Weiner, 1983; Hussain, 2000) ^[11, 6]. These demographic changes have raised persistent concerns among indigenous communities such as the Ahoms, Bodos, and other tribal groups regarding the erosion of cultural identity, loss of ancestral land, and diminished political representation (Baruah, 1999; Sharma, 2011) ^[1, 10].

Such tensions culminated in major political movements, most notably the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), which was driven by the demand for detection and deportation of undocumented immigrants and ultimately led to the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 (Misra, 2014; Saikia, 2019) ^[7, 5]. The Accord symbolized a political compromise but left

many implementation challenges unresolved, particularly around citizenship verification and constitutional safeguards.

In the contemporary period, national-level initiatives such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have reignited longstanding debates over citizenship, secularism, and indigenous rights. These policies have often polarized public opinion along religious and ethnic lines, intensifying identity-based politics and civil society mobilization in the state (Goswami, 2020; Baruah, 2020) [5, 2].

2. Nature and Scope

2.1 Nature of the study: This research paper takes a historical, analytical, and political lens to examine the complex interrelation between indigeneity, immigration, and politics in Assam. It seeks to explore how successive waves of immigration particularly from present-day Bangladesh have reshaped the demographic, cultural, and economic profile of the state and affected the socio-political life of its indigenous communities. By tracing historical patterns of migration, the study uncovers the roots of the identity-based tensions that continue to define Assam's politics. It further investigates how indigeneity is constructed, contested, and asserted as a form of resistance to perceived demographic and cultural displacement, leading to mass mobilizations, legal battles, and policy responses.

2.2 Scope of the study: The scope of this study spans from colonial-era migration policies to contemporary debates around the NRC and CAA, encompassing major political movements such as the Assam Agitation and the signing of the Assam Accord. It examines how ethnic and tribal groups define and mobilize indigeneity, both to assert rights over land, culture, and political representation and to resist perceived outsider influence. The study also evaluates how state policies, political party agendas, and electoral strategies have used or shaped the immigration debate for political capital, contributing to both regional instability and national policy shifts. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the paper provides insights into the legal, political, and identity-driven frameworks that continue to shape Assam's governance and inter-community relations.

3. Rationale

The state of Assam presents a unique and complex case where issues of indigeneity and immigration have not only shaped its demographic structure but have also deeply influenced its political landscape. Writing a research paper on this topic is essential to understand the historical and contemporary conflicts arising from large-scale migration, particularly from Bangladesh, and its perceived threat to Assamese identity, land rights, and political representation. The issue of illegal immigration, especially post-Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh war, has triggered intense debates, mass movements like the Assam Agitation, and landmark policy decisions such as the Assam Accord, NRC, and CAA.

This research is timely and significant because the intersection of identity politics, legal frameworks, and ethnic assertions in Assam continues to influence national debates on citizenship, secularism, and federalism. The increasing polarization, protests, and legal challenges

surrounding the CAA-NRC framework have reignited fears of marginalization among both indigenous and immigrant communities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for framing inclusive policies but also for addressing ethnic tensions, legal uncertainties, and preserving social harmony. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the narratives, policies, and political mobilizations around indigeneity and immigration to contribute to informed academic discourse and policymaking.

4. Objectives

This paper has three clear and research objectives:-

- To analyze the historical patterns of immigration into Assam and their impact on the socio-political life of the indigenous communities.
- To examine how indigeneity is defined, asserted, and politically mobilized by different ethnic and tribal groups in response to perceived threats from immigration.
- To critically evaluate the role of political movements, state policies e.g., NRC and CAA, in shaping the discourse around indigeneity and immigration in Assam.

5. Methodology and Data

5.1 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology using a combination of historical analysis, policy review, and thematic content analysis to explore the intersections of indigeneity, immigration, and politics in Assam. Primary focus is placed on interpreting official documents, government reports, historical records, and legal texts such as the Assam Accord, NRC and CAA frameworks. Additionally, the research incorporates discourse analysis of speeches, media reports, and manifestos of political parties to understand how narratives of indigeneity and immigration are constructed and mobilized in the public and political domains. The study also includes case studies of key events, such as the Assam Agitation and anti-CAA protests, to provide grounded insights into how local actors and institutions respond to these issues. Where applicable, interviews with experts, academics, and local stakeholders may be used to enrich the analysis with firsthand perspectives.

5.2 Data: The data for this research is drawn from a wide range of secondary and primary sources. Secondary data includes academic journals, books, historical archives, census reports (especially 1951-2011), government publications, parliamentary debates, and policy papers related to immigration and identity politics in Assam. Primary data consists of official documents such as the Assam Accord (1985), NRC lists, court verdicts, and the text of the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019). Media sources both regional and national are used to capture the public discourse and political narratives around indigeneity and immigration. Data from Foreigners Tribunals, reports by the Home Ministry, and findings from human rights organizations also provide valuable insights. Together, this diverse data set helps build a comprehensive understanding of how immigration has influenced the ethnic landscape, policy responses, and political dynamics of Assam.

6. Findings of the study

6.1 Historical patterns and socio-political impact: The study finds that immigration into Assam has occurred in distinct historical phases, beginning with colonial-era migration from East Bengal, followed by waves during Partition (1947) and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). These migrations significantly altered Assam's demographic composition, particularly in districts like Dhubri, Barpeta, and Nagaon, where immigrant populations now form a majority. This demographic shift has led to long-standing fears among indigenous communities of cultural dilution, economic displacement, and political marginalization. The population increase far exceeding the national average in the 20th century fueled the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) and shaped popular demands for protecting indigenous rights. The study reveals that historical grievances continue to inform contemporary political discourse and community mobilizations.

6.2 Indigeneity and Political Mobilization: The concept of indigeneity in Assam is fluid and politically charged, often defined by a group's historical presence, cultural uniqueness, and linguistic identity. Ethnic groups such as the Ahoms, Bodos, Karbis, and Misings have mobilized around the narrative of being the "sons of the soil" through slogans like "Jati, Mati, Bheti". The assertion of indigeneity is not only cultural but deeply political, tied to demands for land rights, autonomy, reservation, and constitutional safeguards e.g., Clause 6 of the Assam Accord. These groups frequently organize through student unions, tribal councils, and regional parties, transforming identity claims into powerful political tools. The findings show that indigeneity has been used both to resist migration-driven change and to negotiate state recognition and political power within Assam's multi-ethnic framework.

In Assam, indigenous assertions have grown stronger in response to ongoing immigration and its perceived threats. Communities such as the Ahoms, Bodos, and other tribal groups argue that the continued influx of migrants endangers their cultural identity, traditional customs, and linguistic heritage (Gohain, 2018) ^[4]. They stress the urgent need to preserve these distinct cultural elements from dilution by external influences. Moreover, the issue is deeply tied to land rights and political representation, with indigenous people fearing marginalization in governance and decision-making. Many feel that their economic survival and traditional livelihoods, particularly in agriculture, are threatened by encroachment due to unchecked immigration. At the same time, human rights advocates highlight the plight of migrants, many of whom are stateless or forcibly displaced, calling for a more ethical and inclusive citizenship policy (Baruah, 2020) ^[2].

However, political parties often exploit the immigration issue for electoral benefits, creating hurdles in formulating fair and lasting solutions (Dutta, 2021) ^[3]. The demographic shifts caused by illegal immigration from Bangladesh have intensified fears among indigenous communities of becoming minorities in their own land. This fuels demands for stricter immigration control and legal safeguards for native populations. Overall, indigenous assertions in Assam reflect a struggle for cultural survival, political autonomy, and economic security amidst complex humanitarian and

political dynamics.

6.3 Political Mobilisation in Assam: The Assam Movement (1979-1985) was a landmark in the state's history, spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) demanding the identification and expulsion of illegal immigrants. The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, which set March 24, 1971, as the cutoff date for identifying foreign nationals (Baruah, 2020) ^[2]. However, its implementation remains controversial, as indigenous groups argue that illegal migration has continued beyond this date, leading to socio-economic challenges. The identification and deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam through the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 proved to be highly complex and controversial. Unlike the Foreigners Act, which applied to the rest of India and placed the burden of proof on the accused, the IM(DT) Act placed this burden on the complainant or the state, making it extremely difficult to prove someone as an illegal immigrant. As a result, very few people were declared illegal migrants despite widespread concerns of large-scale infiltration from Bangladesh. The tribunals established under the Act were slow, under-resourced, and often viewed as ineffective. Between 1983 and 2005, only a negligible number of individuals were identified and deported, which fueled public frustration and allegations of political leniency toward migrants for electoral gains.

But the Supreme Court of India struck down the IM(DT) Act in 2005, declaring it unconstitutional and replacing it with the Foreigners Act, 1946, which now governs such cases in Assam. However, even after its repeal, the detection and deportation process remained cumbersome, with thousands of cases pending in Foreigners Tribunals. Many individuals declared "foreigners" by tribunals have no access to legal aid or proof of nationality, complicating appeals and leading to detention in temporary camps. Deportation to Bangladesh is further stalled by lack of bilateral agreement and non-acceptance of declared foreigners by the Bangladeshi government. Thus, the legacy of the IM(DT) Act continues to haunt Assam, where legal, humanitarian, and logistical challenges make the resolution of the illegal immigration issue deeply complicated and contentious.

6.4 Political movements, policies and electoral dynamics:

The research highlights that political responses to immigration from the Assam Accord to the NRC and CAA have been shaped as much by grassroots movements as by party interests and electoral calculations. While the NRC was intended to resolve the question of citizenship, its exclusion of 1.9 million people (many from marginalized backgrounds) has generated fresh controversy. The CAA, by offering citizenship to non-Muslim migrants, has been seen as violating the secular promise of the Constitution and the cut-off year of 1971 under the Assam Accord. Political parties, both national and regional, have used the immigration issue to mobilize votes, sometimes polarizing communities along religious or ethnic lines. The findings suggest that electoral politics, rather than consistent policy application, often drives the state's approach to immigration and indigeneity leaving critical issues unresolved and socially divisive.

7. Discussions

7.1 Historical patterns and socio-political impact: The historical influx of immigrants into Assam, particularly from East Bengal (now Bangladesh), has deeply shaped the region's demographic and political landscape. The British colonial policy of encouraging settlement for agricultural productivity initiated a trend that escalated during Partition in 1947 and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. These successive waves transformed the demographic structure in districts such as Dhubri, Barpeta, and Nagaon. As immigrant populations grew, indigenous communities began to express fears of losing their land, language, and cultural heritage. These anxieties culminated in the Assam Agitation (1979-85), demanding detection, deletion, and deportation of illegal immigrants. Though the Assam Accord (1985) sought to address these concerns, its implementation has remained inconsistent, creating lasting distrust. This historical experience continues to shape voting behavior, group identity, and inter-community relations. Many Assamese still perceive immigration as a threat to their survival, fueling protests and demands for protective legislation. The demographic anxieties have also led to communal polarization, affecting social cohesion. Thus, historical migration patterns are not just demographic facts but central to the socio-political anxiety of Assam today.

7.2 Indigeneity and Political Mobilization: In Assam, indigeneity functions as both a cultural identity and a political claim. It is grounded in the assertion of being original inhabitants with a unique socio-cultural heritage under threat from outsiders, particularly immigrants. Ethnic communities such as the Bodos, Ahoms, Karbis, and Misings have politically mobilized around this identity to demand autonomy, land rights, and constitutional recognition. Slogans like "Jati, Mati, Bheti" (identity, land, and home) have become rallying cries in movements and elections. These groups use student organizations (like AASU), regional parties (like AGP or UPPL), and tribal councils as platforms to assert their claims. In response to migration, indigeneity has evolved from cultural pride to political activism. It is used to demand exclusive rights over resources, employment, and political representation. However, defining who is 'indigenous' is often contested and exclusionary, especially for communities living in Assam for generations but not officially recognized as such. These mobilizations have shaped state policies, especially around reservations and constitutional protections, but they have also deepened ethnic divides. Hence, indigeneity in Assam is not static but an evolving political strategy shaped by history, demography, and identity politics.

7.3 Political movements, policies and electoral dynamics: Assam's political response to immigration has been profoundly shaped by grassroots movements and electoral strategy. The Assam Accord (1985) attempted to provide a legal framework to address concerns about illegal immigration, but its inconsistent execution has left many dissatisfied. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) update in 2019 aimed to identify legal citizens, but it excluded nearly 1.9 million people, many of whom are poor, marginalized, and from minority communities. This led to fear and resentment, especially as the process was seen as arbitrary and bureaucratic. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), on the other hand, sparked massive protests in

Assam. While it offered protection to non-Muslim migrants from neighboring countries, critics argued it violated the secular spirit of the Constitution and Assam Accord's 1971 cut-off date. Political parties—both regional and national—have used immigration issues to consolidate vote banks, often along communal lines. The BJP, for instance, has used CAA to appeal to Hindu migrants, while opposition groups frame it as a threat to Assamese identity. These dynamics show how policy and politics intertwine, often sacrificing long-term resolution for short-term gains, and keeping the immigration-indigeneity debate alive and volatile in Assam's political sphere.

7.4 The National Register of Citizens (NRC): The NRC in Assam was updated in 2019 with the aim of identifying genuine Indian citizens and detecting undocumented migrants, especially from Bangladesh. The final NRC list, published on 31 August 2019, included 31.1 million applicants out of 33 million, leaving out 1.9 million people (Dutta, 2021) ^[3]. This exclusion sparked widespread concern about procedural lapses, lack of proper documentation, and the risk of statelessness among those left out. Critics highlighted that many of the excluded were women, poor, and marginalized communities, who lacked access to historical documents required for verification. In response to the NRC fallout, the central government introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019, which seeks to provide Indian citizenship to non-Muslim refugees Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who arrived in India before 31 December 2014. While the government claims CAA offers protection to persecuted minorities, opponents argue it violates the secular nature of the Constitution and discriminates on religious grounds. The CAA-NRC combination has drawn national and international criticism for potentially targeting Assamese Muslims and undermining indigenous rights. In Assam, protests erupted across ethnic groups, who feared that the CAA would legitimize migrants settled post-1971, thus threatening Assamese identity and culture. The NRC and CAA remain central to debates on citizenship, identity, and constitutional values in India.

7.5 The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): The CAA was passed by the Indian Parliament on 11 December 2019, aims to grant citizenship to non-Muslim refugees specifically Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians who fled religious persecution from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, and entered India before 31 December 2014. However, the exclusion of Muslims from this list has sparked widespread criticism for being discriminatory and violating the secular principles of the Indian Constitution. In Assam, opposition to the CAA was particularly intense because the law contradicts the Assam Accord of 1985, which fixed 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date for detecting and deporting illegal migrants, irrespective of religion. Critics in Assam feared that CAA would allow the legal settlement of post-1971 Bengali Hindu migrants, thereby threatening Assamese identity, culture, and linguistic demographics (Sharma, 2019) ^[9]. Massive protests erupted across the state, with participation from students, civil society, and indigenous groups. The protests turned violent in places like Guwahati and Dibrugarh, prompting curfews and internet shutdowns. The

Assam government itself appeared divided, with some BJP allies voicing opposition. Over 80 petitions challenging the CAA are currently pending before the Supreme Court. While the law has been passed, its rules for implementation have not yet been notified, keeping the controversy alive and unresolved.

8. Socio-Political Landscape

8.1 Historical background and demographic changes:

Assam's demographics changed significantly due to waves of migration from East Bengal during British rule and post-Partition events (Weiner, 1983) ^[11]. The 1901-1951 population surge and the 1971 refugee crisis intensified fears of indigenous marginalization (Baruah, 1999) ^[1]. The Muslim population rose from 24.68% (1951) to 34.22% (2011), deepening identity anxieties (Census of India, 2011). These shifts triggered debates over land, culture, and representation.

8.2 Socio-Economic Impact of Immigration: Migrants have supported Assam's agrarian economy, especially in Barpeta and Nagaon, contributing to food security (Sharma, 2011) ^[10]. They also fill low-wage jobs in construction and domestic work. However, unregulated migration has led to land encroachment and resource conflicts (Assam Govt., 2012). This imbalance has fueled communal tensions and political unrest in the Brahmaputra valley.

8.3 Political and Legal Responses: The Assam Agitation led to the Assam Accord (1985), setting 1971 as the cutoff date for detecting illegal immigrants (Misra, 2014) ^[7]. The NRC update in 2019 excluded 1.9 million people, triggering legal and humanitarian concerns (Goswami, 2020) ^[5]. The CAA (2019) drew criticism for violating the Accord by offering citizenship to post-1971 migrants. Deportation remains difficult due to the lack of bilateral agreements with Bangladesh.

8.4 Rise of Tribal Politics and Accords: Tribal groups like the Bodos and Karbis sought autonomy to escape cultural and political marginalization (Baruah, 2020) ^[2]. Movements like the Bodo agitation led to peace accords in 1993, 2003, and 2020, granting Sixth Schedule autonomy. Parties like BPF and UPPL gave tribes political power, especially in lower and hill Assam. Yet, tribal assertion has also triggered ethnic rivalries over land and reservation rights.

8.5 Rise and Fall of Asom Gana Parishad: AGP, born from the Assam Agitation, won power in 1985 with promises to curb illegal immigration (Saikia, 2019) ^[8]. However, weak governance and failure to implement the Accord led to its decline. Alliances with BJP diluted its regional appeal, reducing AGP to a minor coalition player. Its fall reflects the fragility of regional parties in managing populist expectations and governance.

8.6 Rise of BJP in Assam: The BJP rose as a major force by blending nationalism with regional concerns, winning power in 2016 (Baruah, 2020) ^[2]. Strong leadership, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and NRC-CAA narratives helped consolidate Hindu votes. Alliances with AGP, BPF, and later UPPL expanded its reach. Despite CAA protests, BJP retained power in 2021, signaling a shift from ethno-regionalism to Hindutva-backed governance.

8.7 Rise of Minority Politics under UMF and AIUDF:

Minority parties like UMF (1980s) and AIUDF (2005) emerged in response to exclusion fears post-Assam Accord (Hussain, 2000) ^[6]. AIUDF, led by Badruddin Ajmal, voiced Muslim concerns over NRC, evictions, and communal bias. By 2011, it became Assam's third-largest party, symbolizing Muslim political assertion. Critics call it divisive; supporters see it as vital for minority representation.

9. Critical arguments on immigration

While immigration in Assam is often viewed through security and identity concerns, migrants especially from Bangladesh and West Bengal have significantly supported the economy. They fill labor gaps in agriculture, construction, and small industries, working under difficult conditions and helping sustain rural livelihoods and industrial viability. Immigration has enriched Assam's cultural fabric through the introduction of diverse languages, cuisines, festivals, and traditions. The coexistence of migrant and indigenous cultures has fostered tolerance, added to Assam's artistic heritage, and helped maintain demographic balance in low-growth areas. Migrants have developed neglected border regions by engaging in farming, trade, and settlement activities, which spurred infrastructure and market growth. In cases of forced displacement, offering refuge reflects India's humanitarian values. Overall, immigration contributes positively to Assam's economy, culture, and regional development.

Opposition to immigration in Assam is largely driven by fears of losing indigenous identity. Continuous migration, especially from Bangladesh, has altered the state's demographics, raising concerns among Assamese and tribal communities about cultural erosion, language decline, and loss of political power. Immigration has sparked major political unrest, notably the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), over fears of electoral manipulation by illegal migrants. Today, allegations of vote-bank politics and competition over resources continue to fuel communal tensions, protests, and periodic violence, hindering regional harmony and development. Opponents argue that immigration strains Assam's limited infrastructure and natural resources, with migrants often settling on ecologically sensitive land. Lack of documentation also raises security concerns related to terrorism, smuggling, and illegal activities, posing risks to governance and national integrity. Proponents of the NRC and CAA see them as essential for protecting India's national identity and offering refuge to persecuted minorities. The CAA grants citizenship to non-Muslim migrants fleeing religious persecution, while the NRC aims to identify illegal residents. Supporters believe these tools are necessary for demographic balance, internal security, and upholding humanitarian responsibilities.

10. Conclusion

Conversely, critics argue that both CAA and NRC suffer from deep constitutional, ethical, and administrative flaws. The most prominent criticism of the CAA is that it excludes Muslims, making religion a criterion for citizenship, which many believe is incompatible with India's secular Constitution. Legal scholars and civil society groups warn that this selective approach violates the principle of equality under Article 14, and undermines India's image as a pluralistic democracy. Similarly, the NRC process, as

witnessed in Assam, has faced backlash due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, with even legitimate citizens being left out because of errors or lack of historical documents (Gupta, 2020). Marginalized groups, especially poor Muslims and women, often lack formal proof of ancestry, putting them at higher risk of exclusion. Critics fear that the NRC-CAA combination could be used as a tool of disenfranchisement, deepening communal divisions and creating widespread fear among minorities (Patel, 2021). The resulting social uncertainty, legal chaos, and humanitarian implications continue to fuel resistance across India.

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