

POPULATION GROWTH OF MAJOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN ASSAM: A REVIEW ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NRC

Author- Jinti Moni Boro, M.Phil. Research Scholar, Department Of Geography, Gauhati University, Assam, India, Email id: jintimoniboro@gmail.com, Contact no. - 6026068679

Co Author- Neithoilom Hrangkhoh, Post Graduate, Department Of Geography, Gauhati University, Assam, India, Email id: lomahrangkhoh@gmail.com, Contact no. -8638442035

Co Author- Asha Boro, B.Tech. Assam Engineering College, Jalukbari, Guwahati, Assam, India, Email id: ashaboro555@gmail.com, Contact no. - 7896605465

ABSTRACT: Population growth in any distinct area has adverse effect on the social, political and geographical landscapes and as such the state of Assam since the recent decades has been under the pressure of large volume of influx of migrants from the neighboring lands. This paper, “**Population growth of major religious groups in Assam: a review on the implementation of NRC**” seeks to understand the credibility and effect of the implemented policies in tackling the upsurge of population growth. Much of the population growth is credited to the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh which is also the major reason for the implementation of National Register of Citizens (NRC) as a stratagem for the verification and identification of genuine Indian citizens. The aims and objectives of this paper is to underline the trend of population growth of major communities, its root causes, impact on the indigenous ethnicity and also to study the estimated population composition for the succeeding years based on the major religious groups of Assam. It also deals with the concerns regarding the controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) which required all the people living in Assam to produce verifiable documents of ancestry to be enlisted as genuine Indian citizens leading to its impact on both the immigrants and the indigenous people of Assam regardless of their community and as to how the Government of India has proceeded to deal with the lives of those affected. Studying the consistency in the growing trend of population of the major communities it has been seen that the

Muslim community gained an increase in population with more than 50% share in accretion from 2001 to 2011 which is likely to double in the next decadal census considering the present growing trend.

KEYWORDS: NRC, Population growth, Indigenous.

INTRODUCTION

Population growth is the transform of population over time of a place connected with a variety of demographic, economic and socio-cultural factors. With the boost in population, mostly credited to the influx of illegal immigrants diverse socio-political issues and conflicts are imminent. Assam has since the past decades been encountering such situations. The state of Assam, because of its geo-political importance has been through a history of various colonial invaders and bears the historical footprints of many tribes and communities. Since 1901 to 2001 Assam has seen a drastic change in population growth with an increase of 71 percent, owing to the natural increase and also mainly to the huge influx of illegal immigrants from the neighboring country Bangladesh especially since the year 1951. The increase in illegal migrant population has affected the indigenous people of Assam and other Northeast states of India resulting in the prevailing various socio-political issues.

To bring a solution to the decades old problem the Government of India introduced the National Register of Citizens (NRC) as a oblige to authenticate citizenship in India. The main aim is to identify illegal immigrants who entered and settled in Assam, primarily from Bangladesh after March 25, 1971 and to deport them back to their country. Even though the NRC was implemented with intent to verify and deport the illegal immigrants, the process and its fallout have become controversial in the recent past.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study has been done with guidance and information throughout its course of study collected from various publications and articles. The information on population growth and migrant problems its causes, magnitude and consequences have been taken from articles such as-

SSRN Electronic Journal January 2011 published an article; “Illegal Migration into Assam: Magnitude, Causes, and Economic Consequences” by Hiranya K Nath and Suresh Kr. Nath, examines various aspects of illegal migration into Assam from Bangladesh. It attempts to define an illegal immigrant in Assam by discussing the parameters set by history and polity of the state over a long period of time.

Dialogue January-March, 2005, Volume 6 No. 3 titled ‘Demographic Threats in Assam’ by D. N. Bezboruah, tries to bring focus on the large scale illegal migration from Bangladesh. He concludes that this invasion from present Bangladesh and erstwhile East Pakistan is a recent phenomenon and the problem is very serious because of the present rate of influx.

“Trend of decadal growth rate of population in Assam: with special reference to India” by Parboti Poonam Saikia, tries to show the trend of decadal growth rate population in Assam during the period 1901-2011 and explains that the growth rate of population in Assam and other North Eastern states is somewhat unnatural as compared to other states of the country. The paper states that the growth of population in Assam has taken place due to both natural increase and migration.

A very profound discourse on population migration, NRC implementation and resultant consequences was delivered in *Report of the Public Hearing of February, 2019* at Guwahati. The report focuses on the social, political and legal issues facing the state of Assam and its people with caution and humility. The report states that issues are very complex and the rest of the country somewhat unaware of the historical background and the point of view of the various sections of Assamese society.

An article by Joyeeta Bhattacharjee on *Promises behind the National Register of Citizens of India, Issues and challenges, India matters* underlines the setback and challenges in the implementation of NRC and the integrity in fulfilment of the made promises. He states that the BJP’s electoral fortunes in the ongoing elections will be a pivotal determinant in the

implementation of the NRC across the country. However, politics aside, NRC is a forward looking step in documenting India's citizens and detects and deters infiltrators.

An article by Kaushik Deka on "*Why Assam is protesting against Citizenship Amendment Bill?*" published on India Today Magazine Insight on December 11, 2019 states massive protest are going on in Assam to protect the Assamese identity against the influx of immigrants from Bangladesh, it failed to take into account the fear among the Assamese of the cultural hegemony of the Hindu Bengalis.

OBJECTIVES

The paper has been prepared to focus on certain aims and objectives.

- To highlight the trend of population growth of major communities in Assam its root causes, impact on the indigenous ethnicity.
- To study the estimated population composition for the succeeding years based on the major religious groups of Assam
- To review the implementation NRC in Assam

METHODOLOGY

The study is fundamentally dependent on the secondary sources from internet, books, journals, magazines, articles and newspaper. The approach to present the interpretation of the analysed data is descriptive and analytical in the necessary discourse of facts and findings.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE POPULATION GROWTH OF MAJOR COMMUNITIES IN ASSAM

The first census conducted in the era of British India in 1901 recorded the state population as 3.28 million which rose to 31.20 million according to the 2011 census. The 2011 Assam census provides a good insight of the current demography of the state. As per the 2011 census, Hindu

population is 19,180,759 forming the majority in Assam state constituting 61.47% of Assam population. Out of the 27 districts, Hindu forms the majority religion in 18 districts of Assam state. According to the census of 2011, the highest percentage share of Hindu population is in Dhemaji (95.47%) and lowest percentage share of Hindu population is in Dhubri (19.92%). For the same period, the highest percentage share of Muslim population is Dhubri (79.67%) and lowest percentage share of Muslim population is Dhemaji (1.96%).

The Muslim population plays an important role in electoral of Assam state with a population of 10,679,345 forming a significant 34.22% of total population. Muslim shares the second largest population in Assam forming majority in 9 out of the 27 districts of the state.

The population of other communities such as Christianity and Buddhism share the minor portion of the total Assam state population. Below is a table which shows the decadal population growth rate of major religious groups in Assam.

Table 1: Decadal population growth rate of major religious groups in Assam (1971-2011).

Religious groups	1971	1981	GR(1971-1981)	
Total	14,625,152	18,041,248	0.02	2.12
Hindu	10,604,618	12,632,133	0.02	1.76
Muslims	3,592,124	4,784,698	0.03	2.91
Christians	381,010	532,552	0.03	3.41
Buddhists	22,565	38,004	0.05	5.35
Others	24,835	53,861	0.08	8.05

Religious groups	1981	1991	GR(1981-1991)	
Total	18,041,248	22,414,322	0.02	2.19
Hindu	12,632,133	15,047,293	0.02	1.76
Muslims	4,784,698	6,373,204	0.03	2.91
Christians	532,552	744,367	0.03	3.41
Buddhists	38,004	64,008	0.05	5.35
Others	53,861	185,421	0.13	13.16

Religious groups	1991	2001	GR(1991-2001)	
Total	22,414,322	26,655,528	0.02	1.75
Hindu	15,047,293	17,296,455	0.01	1.40
Muslims	6,373,204	8,240,611	0.03	2.60
Christians	744,367	986,589	0.03	2.86
Buddhists	64,008	51,029	-0.02	-2.24
Others	185,421	69,475	-0.09	-9.35

Religious groups	2001	2011	GR(2001-2011)	
Total	26,655,528	31,205,576	0.02	1.59
Hindu	17,296,455	19,180,759	0.01	1.04
Muslims	8,240,611	10,679,345	0.03	2.63
Christians	986,589	1,165,867	0.02	1.68
Buddhists	51,029	54,993	0.01	0.75
Others	69,475	124,612	0.06	6.02

Table 2: Decadal population growth rate of major religious groups in Assam (1951-2011).

Religious groups	GR (1951-61)	GR (1961-71)	GR (1971-81)	GR (1981-91)	GR (1991-01)	GR (2001-11)
Total	3.04	3.04	2.12	2.19	1.75	1.59
Hindu	2.94	3.21	1.76	1.76	1.40	1.04
Muslim	3.30	2.74	2.91	2.91	2.60	2.63
Christian	5.08	3.77	3.41	3.41	2.86	1.68
Buddhist	5.47	3.01	5.35	5.35	-2.24	0.75
Others	-0.98	-11.52	8.05	13.16	-9.35	6.02

Comparatively the growth rate of Christianity and Buddhism from 1971 to 1991 is higher than the growth rate of Hindu and Muslim though relatively much lower in population proportion. The decadal trend of Muslim population growth seems to be the most consistent comparatively and recorded to be the highest in 2011 Census. Meanwhile the population growth rate of Hindu and Christian were lower than the previous decadal growth rate and is showing a decreasing

trend since the past decades. The highest overall growth rate was recorded in the decadal year 1981-1991.

In Assam the recorded Muslim population in 1901 census during the British era was 503,670 and it grew to 1,279,388 in 1931 Census. The highest trend in the growth of Muslim population was recorded in the 1991 census with 77.33% increase rate with 1971 as its base year (in 1981, census was not conducted in Assam due to disturbed conditions resulting from insurgency).

Table 3: Muslim population of Assam (present-day boundaries)

Year	Muslim Population	Increase	% Increase
1901	503,670		
1911	634,101	130,431	25.9%
1921	880,426	246,325	38.25%
1931	1,279,388	398,962	45.31%
1941	1,696,978	417,590	32.64%
1951	1,995,936	298,958	17.62%
1961	2,765,509	769,573	38.56%
1971	3,594,006	828,497	29.96%
1991*	6,373,204	2,779,198	77.33%
2001	8,240,611	1,867,407	29.30%
2011	10,679,345	2,438,734	29.59%

* Variation for two decades (1971–1991). In 1981, census was not conducted in Assam due to disturbed conditions resulting from insurgency.

Causes of population growth in Assam

Assam has an approximate rural population of 86% which is one reason why majority of the people are backward and illiterate and is one of the causal factors of natural growth of population. The increased birth rate because of the huge number of illiterate indigenous people does not alone account for the high trend of population growth. Much of the increase in state population owes to the illegal immigration. The last few decades in Assam has seen an influx of huge volume of illegal immigrant from the neighbouring lands, majority of which are from across the border of Bangladesh. The cause for illegal migration into Assam can be accounted for the various push and pull factors at the base.

The unfavourable economic condition aided by the excessive population growth resulting in huge population density can be one of the push-factor acting upon the huge population migration from Bangladesh into Assam. Gogoi (2005) also finds that geographical distance between the place of origin and the place of destination has significant negative effect on migration. Therefore, Assam being the next favourable neighbouring country of Bangladesh receives a large number of the illegal migrants.

The vast natural resources of Assam: the fertile alluvial floodplain of the mighty river Brahmaputra, the availability of vast uninhabited forest lands act as the natural pull factors. The demand for service as labour force also contributed to the influx and settlement of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. There are various underlying political factors as well which aided the illegal infiltration of Bangladeshi migrants into Assam.

Table 4: Spatial distribution of migrants from outside India into Assam, during 2001.

Districts	Total population	International					% of migrants
		Bangladesh	Bhutan	Nepal	Other	Total	
Kokrajhar	905764	8183	108	181	194	8666	0.93
Dhubri	1637344	7320	20	115	232	7687	0.47
Goalpara	822035	7222	11	130	497	7860	0.95
Bongaigaon	904835	12155	23	191	284	12653	1.40
Barpeta	1647201	8758	22	71	140	8991	0.55
Kamrup	2522324	12261	67	2743	1098	16169	0.64
Nalbari	1148824	4278	33	667	599	5577	0.49
Darrang	1504320	8349	67	866	484	9766	0.65
Marigaon	776256	3561	6	114	328	4009	0.52
Nagaon	2314629	24258	6	493	1374	26131	1.13
Sonitpur	1681513	8595	39	1537	457	10628	0.63
Lakhimpur	889010	2064	12	708	184	2968	0.33
Dhemaji	571944	2184	17	478	365	3044	0.53
Tinsukia	1150062	4415	74	3197	248	7934	0.69
Dibrugarh	1185072	2185	4	1170	163	3522	0.33
Sibsagar	1051736	622	1	461	87	1171	0.11
Jorhat	999221	854	4	483	73	1414	0.14
Golaghat	946279	979	16	662	69	1726	0.18
Karbi Anglong	813311	3504	30	2636	459	6629	0.82
North Cachar	188079	444	6	736	12	1198	0.64
Cachar	1444921	22868	2	190	414	23474	1.63
Karimganj	1007976	15964	0	53	137	16154	1.61
Hailakandi	542872	3121	0	14	52	3187	0.59
Assam	26655528	164144 (86.14%)	568	17896 (9.39%)	7950	190558	0.71

Source: Census of India, 2001.

The table prepared according to the 2001 census on the inflow of migrants from different neighbouring countries into Assam shows that majority of the migrants in Assam come from

Bangladesh contributing to more than 86% of the total migrant population. The highest number of migrants is recorded in Nagaon and Cachar district.

Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, made a statement in Parliament on 14 July 2004 saying that 20 million illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators were living in India. The total population of Assam according to the 2001 census was 26,655,528 and the total migrant population living in Assam was 190,558 out of which 164,144 illegal immigrants are from Bangladesh.

In recent years, thousands of Rohingya people have been entering India illegally and it is believed that there are over 40,000 Rohingya illegal immigrants in India, mostly in Assam, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir

Impact on the indigenous ethnicity

In the recent decades the illegal immigrants have not only encroached the public lands but have also encroached the lands in the reserved belts and blocks for the rural indigenous tribal population in Assam which have led to the destruction of the eco-system and gave rise to ethnic tensions. In 2005, a Supreme Court bench ruled Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act (IMDT) as unconstitutional while, with reference to the Sinha Report, maintained that the impact of the “aggression” represented by large-scale illegal migration from Bangladesh had made the life of the people of Assam and Tripura “wholly insecure and the panic generated thereby had created fear psychosis” in other north-eastern States.

The unimpeded migrant increase will result in the indigenous people becoming a minority in their own land. One such example can be seen in the state of Tripura where the indigenous tribal groups have become a minority in their own state. The illegal migrants have captured and occupied some of the indigenous tribal lands in the outskirts of cities in some of the districts in Assam.

Though the illegal immigrant population does not compete with the indigenous educated group in services they have minimized the labour wage and create a problem in the scale of payment of labour force.

The mixing up of the migrants with the indigenous people in society has resulted in mixture of the tradition and cultures and eventually led to the lost of its originality. The indigenous people also lost the authenticity of their language when they infused up with the migrants.

A REVIEW ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NRC IN ASSAM

The NRC is the list of Indian citizens and was prepared in 1951, following the census of 1951. The process of NRC update was taken up in Assam as per a Supreme Court order in 2013. In order to wean out cases of illegal migration from Bangladesh and other adjoining areas, NRC updating was carried out under The Citizenship Act, 1955, and according to rules framed in the Assam Accord.

Assam Accord, 1985:

During the year 1985, the Assam Accord was signed between the All Assam Students Union (AASU), the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad and the then Central Government led by Rajiv Gandhi to bring stability in the state. The provisions of the Assam Accord were: Any foreigner will be given full citizenship including the right to vote if he/she had come to Assam between 1951 and 1961. The foreigners who had migrated to Assam between 1961 and 1971 will be given all the rights of citizenship except the right to vote, which would be denied for a period of ten years and those who entered Assam after the year 1971 would be deported. Many difficulties arose during the implementation of the Assam Accord as it led to massive law problems.

The objective behind the NRC update is the identification of the illegal migrants who migrated from Bangladesh after 24th March 1971 to Assam. It also aims at determining whether the citizens applying for their names in the NRC are the genuine citizens of Assam or not. One of the basic criteria for identification was that the names of the family members of the applicant should be present in the NRC prepared in 1951 or in the electoral rolls up till March 24, 1971.

A person also can present the following documents as proof of his/her citizenship-

- Birth certificate
- LIC policy

- Refugee registration certificate
- Land and tenancy records
- Citizenship certificate, passport, government-issued license or certificate
- Bank/post office accounts and permanent residential certificate
- Government employment certificate, educational certificate and court records.

Eligibility Criteria for NRC:

A person should fulfill the following criteria to be eligible for the NRC:

- Any persons whose names appeared in the NRC of 1972 or in any of the Electoral Rolls till the date of 24th March 1971 (midnight) as well as their descendants.
- Persons who had registered themselves as per the rules of the Central Government with the Foreigners Registration Regional Officer (FRRO) and are not considered illegal migrants or foreigners by any authority.
- Any person who had migrated into Assam on or after 1st January 1966 but before 25th March 1971.
- People who are original inhabitants of Assam and their children and descendants who are citizens of India provided their citizenship is ascertained beyond a reasonable doubt by the registering authority.
- Persons who can provide any one of the documents issued up to midnight of 24 March 1971 as mentioned in the list of documents admissible for citizenship

NRC: Timeline

1. 1951: First NRC prepared
2. First NRC to check illegal inflow of people.
3. 2013: SC directs state to update NRC
4. 2015: Process to update NRC begins

5. 2018: Draft released; 4,007,707 names excluded
6. June 2019: Additional Draft excludes 1,02,462 people.
7. July 30: Another draft of NRC published excluding around 40 lakh.
8. August 31: 19 lakh people left out of NRC

Consequences:

This exercise of compiling the NRC in the first place has sparked a debate around its social, political and economic consequences.

- Crisis of identity: The influx of immigrants created a crisis of identity among the indigenous people. The cultural survival of the native people will be in jeopardy and might be undermined by illegal migration.
- Difficult to identify the illegal migrants: Due to the similar language spoken by illegal migrants from Bangladesh and the indigenous Bengali speaking Muslim of Assam, it becomes difficult to identify and deport the illegal migration from Assam soil.
- Increase financial burden: Immigration has increased pressure on the part of state government, as the government has to increase the expenditure on education and health facilities to the immigrants.
- Displacing native workers: There is a fear particularly during a recession that immigrants take jobs which would otherwise be taken by local people; in particular place and circumstances there can be competition and conflict.
- Illegal voters: Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants have got their names enlisted in the voting list illegally, thereby claiming themselves as citizens of the state. The immigrant's population act as a vote bank for the political parties in Assam.
- Issue of terrorism: Pakistan's ISI has been active in Bangladesh supporting militant movements in Assam (Lt Gen S K Sinha, 1998). It is alleged that among the illegal migrants there are also militants, who enter into Assam to carry out the terrorist activities.

Migration of outsiders into Assam has a long history, initially people of neighboring states came to the state in search of work but illegal influx of Bangladeshi's over decades has assumed political, economical significance.

FINDINGS

The official presumption that people residing in Assam areas are foreigners has reduced several millions of these highly impoverished, mostly rural, powerless and poorly lettered residents to a situation of helplessness and extreme poverty, destitution, hardship. It has also caused them abiding anxiety and uncertainty about their futures. They are required to convince a variety of usually hostile officials that they are citizens, based on vintage documents which even urban, educated, middle-class citizens would find hard to collect. Women are especially in danger of exclusion from the citizenship register. Typically, they have no birth certificates, are not sent to school, and are married before they become adults.

UN experts recently warned that the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam could render millions of citizens stateless and create instability in India.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The Central Government should appoint a National Immigration Commission to frame a National Migration Policy and a National Refugee Policy. The Commission should examine ways of strengthening the Foreigners Act 1946, as well as feasibility of Identity Cards for both citizens and non-citizens and Work Permits for migrants.
- Border fencing in Assam must be completed forthwith on a war footing. The existing Border Security Force posts and the BSF water wing should be strengthened.
- Our nationals in the border districts and for that matter in the whole State should be provided multipurpose photo identity card.
- The ongoing NRC updating should be completed without delay and proper arrangement for the deportation of illegal migrants should be done.
- The Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983 should be repealed.

CONCLUSION

The population growth in Assam has been mainly due to two reasons- the illiterate backward forming a major portion of the population leading to high birth rate and the huge volume of infiltration of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Because of such there has been a disproportionate trend in the demographic change in the state since the past few decades and has brought various negative impacts upon the indigenous ethnicity of the state.

To counter such a sensitive issue the government of India has implemented the NRC which required verifiable documents of a person for the identification and affirmation of his or her citizenship in India which came out to be a failure, affecting even the indigenous people.

A person's citizenship is a basic human right. Declaring people foreigners in haste without judicially verifying their credentials can leave many human beings stateless.

The need of the hour is that Union Government should clearly chart out the course of action regarding the fate of excluded people from final NRC data and political parties should refrain from coloring the entire NRC process through electoral prospects that may snowball in to communal violence.

There is a need for a robust mechanism of legal support for the four million who have to prove their citizenship to India with their limited means.

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