

THE 1983 ELECTION IN ASSAM - CULMINATION OF A LONG-LASTING CONFLICT

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Virtually since the first National Elections, which took place in 1952, there has been a growing feeling in the Indian state of Assam that migrants from what was then East Pakistan were altering the ethnic composition of the electorate in the state. A number of presentations were made to the Central Government of the magnitude of this migration.

In the mid-sixties, the magnitude of this migration began to be of serious concern. After 1971 when East Pakistan split from Pakistan to become the sovereign state of Bangladesh, the issue assumed a new dimension. Indian and foreign newspapers frequently reported about bloody unrests in Assam and about the violence perpetrated on these immigrants by the indigenous population.

This conflict, arising out of the fear of the indigenous Assamese population in the state that they would be linguistically and ethnically swamped, led to an open confrontation from 1979 onwards, as a result of a discovery during a parliamentary by-election that a very large number had been included in the voters' list who were not Indian citizens.

Following this, the Assamese public opinion began to get organised and increasingly vocal. The students assumed the leadership of the population which was disturbed and apprehensive. Soon, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), which had come into existence earlier, began to attract mass support. This resulted in the formation of a much larger body, the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), which provided a platform for all the elements who had been individually agitating on the issue.

It is against this background that early in 1983 the Central Government took a decision to hold assembly elections in defiance of the strong resistance from substantial sections of public opinion.

The Centre justified its decision on the ground of a "constitutional compulsion": The period of the suspension of the elected assembly could not be extended any further.

The Centre's decision, in spite of its constitutional validity, led first to the AASU and the AAGSP calling upon the people to boycott the elections. This was followed by a large-scale break-down in law and order, and violence, in which at least 8,000 people were reported killed during the election campaign from January 7th until February 20th

which was the last day of polling.¹ The Central Government officially acknowledged the death-toll to be about 2,500, but this figure is considered to be on the conservative side, as the many thousand casualties during the preceding years are not included in these figures.

The following analysis intends to outline some of the important aspects of the conflict in Assam and to explain the intensity of violence. A final assessment will depend on the pattern of migration which involves data regarding the magnitude of migration into Assam, the period of their arrival and their communal/religious/linguistic identities. These are far too contradictory and cannot be verified beyond doubt at this stage. Besides, conflicts which tend to occur separately in the rest of India, coincide in the case of Assam and mutually reinforce each other.

This article is a preliminary study which briefly traces the events preceding the elections and makes a tentative assessment of their causes. Secondly, the election result is analysed in view of the large-scale boycott. Thirdly, the controversial justification for holding the elections is discussed. Finally, the central issue, i.e. the immigration of foreigners, is examined. This problem, as has already been mentioned, has been the source of a permanent conflict since independence, but its genesis dates far back into British colonial rule.

Events preceding the elections

The crisis in Assam is essentially the cumulative outburst of a long-standing minority complex of the Assamese people which began to assume critical dimensions after the partition in 1947. Following the resulting communal clashes in 1950, many Bengalis from the erstwhile East Pakistan took refuge in Assam. The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 resulted in another influx of refugees. Since then, year after year, thousands of illegal immigrants crossed over the "open" border into Assam and tried to settle down there. Neither is their exact number known nor their places of settlement.

The decennially held censuses were usually preceded by violent excesses which were meant to intimidate mainly the Bengali Muslims into declaring Assamese as their spoken language. In the case of the censuses of 1951, 1961 and 1971, this strategy seemed to have paid off. The census results are said to show an excessively high quota of Assamese-speaking persons compared with the actual strength of the Bengali-speaking population. As a result, the census data were, of course, not fully reliable.

The 1981 census was prevented by the agitation leaders. AASU and AAGSP feared that especially the Bengali Muslims would now openly opt for Bengali. Their possible change of attitude, further enforced by the recently immigrated Bengalis, might have resulted in a situation in which Assamese would have been reduced to the status of a minority language.

The actual composition of the heterogenous society can only be estimated. With regard to the most controversial immigrant communities, the Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims, their strength can be seen in table 1.

Table 1
Percentage distribution by major languages and religions

	1951	1961	1971
1. Distribution by languages			
1.1 Assamese	61.93	62.60	60.89
1.2 Bengali	21.41	19.28	19.71
2. Distribution by religions			
2.1 Hindus	65.20	71.33	72.51
2.2 Muslims	22.09	25.30	24.56
2.3 Christians	6.50	2.43	2.61
2.4 Others	6.21	0.94	0.32

Note: With regard to the language distribution, the balance to 100 per cent accounts for other languages. In the 1971 census 124 languages/mother tongues were recorded.

Source: Assam Census Report 1971

Although the Assamese-speaking persons still hold a strong majority, the Bengali immigrants account for a remarkable share: one-fifth of the whole population speaks Bengali. They are mainly Bengali Hindus, because immigrant Muslims tended to adopt Assamese until independence. One-fourth of the population are Bengali Muslim immigrants, because there are only a few Assamese Muslims.

In one respect, however, the census results can not be disputed. They clearly indicate an extraordinary high increase of Assam's population compared with the average Indian growth rate. Table 2 shows the marked difference between both rates of population increase.

Table 2
Population growth in Assam and India

	Assam	India
1. Population in millions		
1951	8.03	361.09
1961	10.84	439.23
1971	14.63	548.16
2. Growth rates in %		
1941-51	19.93	13.31
1951-61	34.98	21.64
1961-71	34.95	24.80

Note: Figures for 1981 are not mentioned, because in the case of Assam they can only be projected.

Source: India - A Reference Annual 1981, Table 1.1, p.7; percentage figures calculated by the author

This difference provides the central argument of the agitators. In order to estimate the number of immigrants, they compare Assam's decade-wise growth rates between 1901-1971 with the all-India decadal growth rates, the latter being much lower for all the decades. If Assam's actually recorded population of 3.289 million in 1901 would be computed on the base of India's growth rates for each of the decades, then Assam's computed population in 1971 would have been 8.355 million instead of the actually recorded 14.625 million, the balance therefore would account for the immigrants.² Thus, the estimated migrant population would be 6.270 million or 42.87 per cent of Assam's population in 1971. If one takes 1951 instead of 1901 as base year because of the 1947 partition of British India, then for 1971, the difference between actual and computed population would be 2.361 million or 16.14 per cent of Assam's population in 1971.

The main controversy focuses on the question whether natural increase or immigration primarily accounts for the above-average growth rates. Taking this into consideration, Goswami applies a different method. He, too, starts with 1901 as base year. Then, however, he uses Assam's decade-wise rates of natural increase as comparison. These rates were estimated by the Office of the Registrar General of India on the base of differences between estimated birth

and death rates in Assam. They were considerably lower than the actually recorded growth rates. According to Goswami, the cumulative migrant population in 1971 was 5.236 millions or 35.80 per cent of Assam's total population.³

Gswami's estimate places the percentage share of immigrants closer to the agitators' upper estimate. As far as any estimate can be reliable in view of the incomplete and uncertain statistical base, his method seems to be appropriate and, thus, his result a realistic estimation.

Another important indicator for an abnormal population increase is the number of persons entitled to vote. The Indian constitution provides for an annual revision of the voters' lists. Especially elections require a fresh up-dating. These regular revisions were carried out until early 1979; later on they were prevented by the increasing unrest. The remarkable increase can be seen in table 3.

Table 3
Number of voters in Assam

Year	Number of voters	Increase	Percentage of increase
1957	4,493,357	-	-
1962	4,942,816	449,459	10.00
1966	5,585,056	642,240	12.99
1970	5,701,805	116,749	2.09
1971	6,296,198	594,393	10.42
March 1977	7,229,543	933,345	14.82
Nov. 1977 (for 1978)	7,974,476	744,933	10.30
1979 (draft)	8,537,497	563,021	7.06

Source: Asam Sahitya Sabha, *Eclipse in the East*, Gauhati 1980, Table II, p.3

For obvious reasons, the voters' lists emerged as the focal point of the agitation. If the fast growth of the electorate, in fact, resulted from the enlistment of illegal immigrants as Indian citizens, then one could assume that they would vote for a party which did not care for identifying and deporting the foreigners or at least displayed a low profile in this crucial matter. In other words, parties which propagated the rigid demands of AASU and AAGSP would cast relatively less votes among the illegal residents

than parties which favoured the attitude of the Congress (I) Central Government.

A revision of the voters' lists in the Lok Sabha constituency of Mangaldoi (its delegate had died) finally set off the crisis which ended in the election tragedy of February 1983. On May 9, 1979, Golab Borbora (Janata Party), the then Chief Minister of Assam, ordered a thorough examination of the Mangaldoi lists. When the lists of 1979 were compared with the ones of the preceding year, it was found that 47,658 "foreigners" had recently been included in the lists.⁴ Besides, in the Assembly constituency of Dalgaon, whose delegate was Mrs. Anwara Taimur (Congress-I), 14,406 "foreigners" were identified.⁵ Although she had won in her constituency in February 1978 with only a margin of 9,206 voters, she, nevertheless, kept her mandate and even temporarily became Chief Minister of a Congress(-I) State Government in December 1980.

Due to the Mangaldoi findings the controversy about the cut-off year intensified to such an extent that finally no government could survive in Assam.

The last regular elections were held for the State Assembly on February 25, 1978. The State Assembly met for its constituting session on March 21, 1978 under the new Chief Minister Golab Borbora. Borbora remained in office only until September 4, 1979 and was replaced by J.N. Hazarika (Asom Janata Dal) on September 9, 1979.

In the summer of 1979 the Janata Government finally discredited itself on the union level. On August 22, 1979, the Lok Sabha was dissolved and national elections were announced for early January 1980. In Assam, the Mangaldoi findings had prepared a favourable situation for the leaders of the agitation to call successfully for an election boycott. In only two of the 14 Lok Sabha constituencies could elections be held. It was an indication that these two constituencies belonged to the Bengali dominated Cachar district.

The disturbances in the course of the boycott campaign led to Hazarika's resignation. On December 12, 1979, "President's Rule" was declared over Assam for the first time since independence, initially for a period of six months, but then extended for another six months. From December 6, 1980 until June 30, 1981, Mrs. Taimur tried to establish a Congress (I) State Government. When she failed, President's Rule was again declared, lasting this time for seven months. From January 30, 1982 until March 18, 1982, K.C. Gogoi became Chief Minister of another Congress (I) State Government. On March 19, 1982, once again President's Rule was declared. Thereby, all deadlines provided

by the Constitution had passed, i.e. (a) within five years after the last Assembly Elections (that was March 21, 1983) and/or (b) within one year of President's Rule (that was March 19, 1983) the Central Government had to decide on one of the options outlined in section 3. New Delhi voted for elections and thus ignored critical voices which predicted civil war-like unrest.

All this largely explains why the AASU and AAGSP held the Centre responsible for this state of affairs. It also explains the main demands of these two bodies which were: (a) to stop the influx of non-Assamese immigrants (mainly Bengali Hindus and Muslims from East Pakistan/Bangladesh); (b) to identify the illegal immigrants and (c) to deport them back to Bangladesh or to distribute them among other Indian states.

The result of the election

The election was for the 126 seats in the State Assembly and 12 of 14 seats in the Lok Sabha which had been vacant since 1980. The polling was spread over three days, February 14, 17, and 20, 1983. In some of the constituencies repolling became necessary on February 21st because of disturbances or absence of the election officers.

Extending the elections over several days was necessary for organisational and security reasons. Most of the Assamese Government employees had joined the election boycott. Likewise, sections of the Assamese police sympathized with the boycotters. Therefore, the Central Government had to recruit employees from other states for election duty in Assam either by forcing them under penalty of disciplinary punishment or by offering baits of financial compensation. Similarly, police units from different parts of India were flown into Assam. As the number of election and security officers was not sufficient to man all the polling booths, they were ordered to rotate during the three rounds of polling. Table 4 shows the results of the election.

As expected, the Congress (I) had won the election. Of the 126 seats, the Congress (I) secured 90, i.e. the two-third majority, and formed the new State Government under Hiteswar Saikia as Chief Minister. Only in five of the twelve Lok Sabha constituencies could the polling be completed (and won by the Congress-I), the remaining seven seats will stay vacant. But actually how representative is the new State Government?

Of the total of 8,67 million persons who had been entitled to vote (reference year: 1979), it was officially claimed that at least 20 per cent of the votes had been cast in

Table 4
Seat distribution of the State Assembly of Assam

Parties	1962	1967	Oct 1971	1972	1978	1983
Congress	79	72	76	95	26	
Congress (I)					8	90
Congress (S)						2
Communist		7				
CPI			7	3	5	1
CPM					11	2
Socialist				4		
PSP	6	5	4			
SSP			3			
Swatantra			1	1		
Janata					53	
PTCA						3
Independents and others	20	40	23	11	23	10
Total of seats	105	124	114	114	126	126 (108)*

*In 17 constituencies the polling could not be finished. In one constituency the election was countermanded because the candidate died.

The Indian parties are well-known for their frequent splits. Therefore, only the most important abbreviations will be explained:

Congress (I) = Congress (Indira); CPI = Communist Party of India; CPM = Communist Party of India (Marxist); PTCA = Plains Tribals Council of Assam.

Source: Times of India, January, 21, 1983; Times of India, February 26, 1983.

the whole of Assam.⁶ Of this 20 per cent two-thirds had supported the Congress (I).

With regard to the actual representation, it is, however, more relevant to look at the constituencies separately. In Assamese dominated constituencies, the boycott was in most cases total. In the Bengali dominated constituencies, on the other hand, the polling was up to 65 per cent (in the Cachar district even up to 80 per cent). "Even if we take the official count at face value, in one-seventh of the constit-

uencies the election was not completed; in one-half of the constituencies in which it was completed the polling was less than 25 per cent; in a third it was less than 10 per cent; in a fifth it was less than 5 per cent."⁷

Another crucial issue is how correctly the polling followed prescribed legal and constitutional procedure. In a note dated September 21, 1982, the Chief Election Commissioner had stated that 12,204 presiding officers and 36,612 polling officers would be required to man the 12,204 polling booths sufficiently. Yet, only in three of Assam's ten districts had the employees of the Assamese Government been willing to go on election duty. Personnel for the remaining seven districts had to be recruited forcefully from outside of Assam. The Central Government, however, only succeeded in airlifting about 8,000 persons into Assam, not enough to provide adequate personnel for all the polling booths. Another opportunity to manipulate the polling was provided by the fact that the airlifted election personnel could hardly read the voter's lists which were entirely written in Assamese.⁸

The following description illustrates that the election, in fact, was converted into a complete farce. Many of the airlifted election officers never reached the polling booths assigned to them. Although the Central Government had airlifted about 75,000 policemen (including the Central Reserve Police Force), it could not guarantee the election officials' safe conduct to their respective booths. The boycotters had blown up a number of bridges and threatened to ambush the election convoys. As a consequence, many an official was stranded at the place where he was dropped by plane or car. He had no alternative but to sign his election report without having ever seen his booth or any voter.

Out of one of his many interviews, Shourie mentioned the following eye witness' report. As this official and his group were too frightened to proceed any further, they were told by the returning officer: "It is up to you, if you want to go to your polling booths I will provide the security. But if you don't want to go then all the same you must fill out your diary and give your report." Except for one officer whose booth was close by none of the others were willing to leave their safe shelter. The witness continued: "They all sat in a room and filled out their diaries. Many put nil voting but several stuffed their boxes with Congress (I) votes."⁹

Shourie reported further examples of manipulation. But the above mentioned will be sufficient to illustrate the doubtful legitimacy of Saikia's new Government. He was asked several times to resign, but the Central Government did not agree to compromise.

Constitutional and political status

Two confronting positions with regard to the legitimacy of the election both constitutionally and politically were expressed.

The Central Government had justified it on the basis of "constitutional compulsion", i.e. elections must be held five years after the last Assembly Elections at the latest and/or after one year of President's Rule (see section 1). All other provisions such as an obligatory revision of the voters' lists were only second to this predominant "constitutional compulsion".

Contrary to this, the sponsors of the boycott, mainly the AASU and AAGSP, were of the opinion that in principle elections should be held but only under the condition that first the constitutional provisions be satisfied according to which the voters' lists be up-dated before each election. In view of the questionable correctness of the lists, holding elections on the base of unrevised lists would violate the constitution.

The Central Government justified its decision on the grounds that the constitution stipulated the periodicity for elections without providing any options. This line of argument, however, ignored two alternatives. Besides, if the Central Government insisted on a literal interpretation of the constitution, it was also obliged to meet another provision literally: The relevant articles of the constitution do not provide for elections in general, but for "free and fair elections".

The first alternative option would have been to extend President's Rule beyond the present maximum of one year. The Central Government argued that it lacked the required two-third majority in the Rajya Sabha in order to amend the constitutional article in question. According to the constitutional law, this article could be amended.

When the Janata Government came into power in 1977, it passed the 44th Constitution Amendment in order to reduce the then maximum duration of President's Rule from three years to only one year. Now, in view of the civil war-like situation in Assam, the opposition parties Janata Party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Lok Dal and AIADMK repeatedly offered their support to amend this article again. They insisted, however, on a formulation which clearly indicated the exceptional case of Assam and which would safeguard against any misuse in future cases. Was it due to lacking political will that the Central Government did not negotiate thoroughly enough with the opposition parties?

But even if New Delhi had not succeeded in amending this article, it would have been left with another option: to declare a state of emergency in Assam "according to constitutional experts the Centre would have been fully justified in imposing emergency in Assam and putting off elections, if the Opposition parties refused to cooperate with the Congress (I) in amending the Constitution".¹⁰

It was argued that Mrs. Gandhi learnt from her mistake when she had declared the internal emergency in India in June 1975. Therefore, she would be reluctant to declare a state of emergency again. But this argument does not seem valid in the case of Assam.

More in keeping with the political reality in India is another thesis. Abraham considered the possible repercussions if the massacres would not have happened in the remote Northeast of India, but in the political or economic nerve-centres of the Indian Union such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu or Punjab. "In any part of 'mainstream' India, such carnage would not merely jeopardise the state and even the Central government's survival, it would put the whole political system under the severest pressure."¹¹

The North East, popularly called the Seven Sisters¹², forms one of the most sensitive areas for India's security. In spite of this strategic importance, the Central Government neglected this region from the time of independence onwards. What the agitators complain about with regard to Assam, holds true for the entire region: "Assam, like Kashmir, is a state hemmed in on all sides by foreign powers - Bangladesh, Burma, China. Why then should the state not be protected in the same way as Kashmir is? Obviously, prejudices die hard and double standards run deep for those Indian leaders in Delhi who have never seen Assam and never regarded it as anything better than a colony of the Republic to be exploited."¹³

The fact that the Central Government rejected both of the above mentioned options, although both of them were in accordance with the constitution and could have been implemented with the necessary political will, proved New Delhi's determination to hold elections ignoring the demand for prior revision. One last question remains: Was there no chance at all to postpone or stop the polling when it was under way?

The responsibilities and powers of the Election Commission had been clarified in court in 1971: "Under Article 324 the Election Commission is entrusted with the superintendence, direction and control of conduct of elections. This implies that the Commission must take all necessary meas-

ures to ensure that a proper and fair poll is taken in every election and the Commission becomes satisfied that on account of some circumstances that has supervened since the original date of polling was fixed, a fair poll can not be taken on that original date, it is the overriding duty of the Commission to fix a fresh date for the poll."¹⁴

When asked about the situation in Assam, S.L. Shakhder, former Chief Election Commissioner, commented on the same line: "A poll can be postponed any time, even if the election is in progress. The Commission has the power to postpone a poll and I exercised this power on various occasions. Only the reasons have to be recorded. The poll can be postponed once the Chief Election Commissioner is clear that it will not be free and fair - or if the poll has been vitiated in any way."¹⁵

In view of the manner in which New Delhi carried out the polling, one can hardly disagree with Shourie's conclusion: "The decision to ram through the elections was a political one, it was the very heart of the electoral strategy of Mrs. Gandhi's party."¹⁶ Winning the elections was certain for the Congress (I), because all the minorities which felt endangered by the agitation leaders' demands would take shelter under the protective arm of the Congress (I).

Genesis of the foreigners' issue

Slogans such as "Jai ai Asom" (victory to mother Assam)¹⁷ or "Assam for the Assamese" provoke the crucial question "who actually is an Assamese?". The present political controversy about the criteria for identifying a "foreigner" originates from a historical weakness of the Assamese to build up "a distinct and well-defined Assamese nation" and to overcome "a lack of confidence in their cultural destiny".¹⁸

Assam was easy prey for the British when they incorporated it into their Empire in 1826. The Brahmaputra Valley was inhabited by various tribes which were ruled by the Ahom aristocracy with a king as formal head. This aristocracy consisted of several family clans on whose consent the king depended. Infights between the different clans and conflicts between the Ahom rulers and the tribes had weakened the Assamese society to such an extent that the British could easily seize power.

As much as this lack of cohesion of the Assamese society has a liability, it was also an asset. The need to cope with so many different ethnic and cultural influence had strengthened the capability of the Assamese to absorb and

integrate alien impacts. This was proved by the remarkable extent up to which immigrated tea garden labourers and Bengali Muslims could be "Assamized" during the first half of this century.

Table 5 illustrates that the indigenous population, in fact, had to face a heavy and a multiple influx of immigrants.

Table 5
Immigration into Assam

1826	Treaty of Yandabu: Beginning of British Colonial rule in Assam
Since 1826	Bengali Hindus from "Bengal Presidency", brought into Assam's administration and judiciary by the British. Main regions of settlement: Districts of Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang, Cachar.
Since about 1871	Tea garden labourers (Hindus), recruited by the British in different Indian regions. Places of origin: West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Santhal Parganas, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra. Original languages: Hindi, Mundari, Santhali, Oroan, Oriya, Thado, Tamil, Telugu etc. Many were "Assamized" until 1951. Permanent immigration until about 1951; main period: end of 19th and beginning of 20th century during the development and extension of the tea plantations.
From about 1891 onwards	Bengali Muslim cultivators from East Bengal ("East Bengal colonists"), moved slowly upwards along the banks of the Brahmaputra. Main district of origin: Mymensingh. Almost complete "Assamization" until 1951. Main regions of settlement: Districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Lakhimpur.
From about 1891	Nepalese (Hindus), British preferred

- onwards (still continuing) them in army and security services (e.g. "Assam Rifles").
Language: Nepali and/or Hindi
- Since 1901 Bengali Hindus from "Bengal Presidency", recruited by the British for manning the newly built railways system in Assam.
- End-1930s until 1944 Under Sir Mohammed Saadulla's Muslim League Ministry large scale recruitment of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal for rice-cultivation along the banks of the Brahmaputra ("Grow more food" - campaign). Recruitment was done in view of the expected partition of British-India on religious lines. This enlarged the "East Bengal colonists" at once. Language: Strong tendency towards "Assamization".
- 1942 Japanese invasion in Burma, Indian refugees entered into Assam and other Northeast provinces. Language: Hindi and Bengali.
- August 1947-1951 Following partition and the transfer of the district of Sylhet to East Pakistan many Bengali Hindus fled from Sylhet and settled in the districts of Cachar, Kamrup, Nowgong and Goalpara.
- 1950 Communal clashes between Bengali Hindus and Muslims in Assam (Parpeta district) and in East Pakistan resulted in migration to and from Assam. Consequently, the Assamese society underwent an acute social metamorphosis.
- Since 1951 Immigration of Hindi speaking Marwari businessmen from Rajasthan (Indian citizens). Areas of residence: Mainly Brahmaputra Valley. By now they exercised control over the nerve-centres of the Assamese economy.
- Since 1951 Temporal migration of Indian citizens from Bihar and other Indian states (mostly Hindus, a few Christians). Unskilled Biharis began to work in unqualified jobs, and the other Indians as experts, Government employees or traders.

1965	Indo-Pakistan war made Bengali Hindus take shelter in Assam.
Since 1971	Influx of refugees and illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Notes:

1. The table does not mention any details about the numerical strength of the respective immigrants' groups. The data is either not reliable enough or does not exist at all for some of the groups.
 2. Since the British used to hold a census decennially, the early immigrants' influxes are mentioned for the first time in the year of the respective census.
 3. "Assamization" means that the respective community adopted Assamese language and culture in the course of time (mainly up to 1951 only) sponsored e.g. by visiting schools with Assamese as means of instruction.
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Source: Table is mainly based on: Susanta Krishna Dass, *Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam, 1891-1981*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.15, No.19, 10 May, 1980, pp.850-859.

This multiple influx explains the widespread fear among the Assamese of being overwhelmed by these foreigners. Yet, Sharma emphasizes the crucial point of the present identity crisis: "The problem in Assam is not whether the linguistic, religious and ethnic minorities will swamp the Assamese but whether the Assamese people will see clearly the strength of their numbers and the maturity of their culture to gain the confidence of these minorities so as to peacefully integrate them into the Assamese nation."¹⁹

If one reads about clashes in India, in most cases one can easily distinguish between the contracting groups involved: Hindus vs. Muslims, caste Hindus vs. Harijans, landless labourers vs. landlords, Naxalites vs. ruling elites, Congress(I) followers vs. Janata followers etc.

In the case of Assam, on the contrary, these conflicts overlap and thus compound the analysis. Long-lasting and multiple tensions finally culminated in the election massacres which were called a "Hobbesian war of all against all": "They testified not so much to 'communalism' as to the total breakdown of governance."²⁰ "Assam is in the grip of conflict: Assamese vs. non-Assamese, Hindu vs. Muslim, supporters of the agitation vs. its opponents, Assamese Hindu vs. Plains tribal, Plains tribal vs. immigrant Muslim,

Assamese Hindu vs. Bengali Hindu, Ahom vs. Ahom, Assamese Muslim vs. Bengali Muslim, Assamese Hindu vs. tea garden labourer and so on."²¹

In this context, two components need to be analysed: The fear of the Assamese of being dominated by the Bengalis and the controversy over the identification of the foreigners. These have to be seen in the background of social change in the Assamese society, its economic backwardness, the increasing tensions between regional power groups and the Central Government and, finally, the fact that the Assam conflict is part of the general tense relationship between the Northeast as a whole and the rest of India.

As can be seen from table 5, most of the immigrants came from West and East Bengal. Even in pre-colonial times, all invasions except one originated from Bengal. This exception occurred in 1820, when the invaders came over from Burma. It was the British residing in Calcutta whom an Ahom prince called in against the Burmese threat. This was just jumping from the frying-pan into the fire, for from then on the immigration of Bengalis changed its character. The British called in Bengali Hindus in order to introduce them as go-betweens (middlemen) in their new power apparatus. In the administration, in the judiciary and later, in the running of the new railway system, the Bengali Hindus functioned as "subimperialist agents" on behalf of the British. In the same way, the Nepalese immigrants functioned in the security sphere (army and police).

The Bengali Hindus were alert enough to take advantage of their strategic position. That is proved by the language conflict which dates back to the early period of colonial rule. The Assamese language belongs to the Thai language group, but had adopted the Bengali script long ago. Pronunciation and vocabulary were, however, different in both languages because the life style of the Assamese and their ethos was much more conditioned by their tribal organisation.

In the early 1930s, Bengali Hindus seemed to have convinced the British that Assamese was only a dialect of Bengali. Consequently, in 1837 the Assamese language was abolished from schools and courts and replaced by Bengali. Only in 1871, did Assamese scholars, supported by American Baptist missionaries, succeed in lifting the ban of their indigenous language.

This old fear was revived in 1956, 1960 and 1972 on account of new language riots. Implementing a provision of the Indian constitution, in 1956, the States Reorganisation Commission was empowered to revise the boundaries of the

Indian states according to the language distribution of the population. With regard to Assam, the Commission suggested the exclusion of two Bengali dominated districts from Assam. It recommended that Goalpara district should be attached to West Bengal, and the Cachar district should form a part of a new state named Purbanchal. In both cases the segregation was prevented by the Bengali Muslims. Until very recently, they had perceived the Bengali Hindus as a more dangerous adversary than the Assamese Hindus and therefore preferred to remain in the state of Assam.

In 1960 the language conflict was rekindled. Until then, English had been the official language in Assam. Against the strong resistance of the Bengali Hindus who opted for a bilingual official, the Assamese succeeded in declaring Assamese as "state language". In 1972, the Bengali Hindus, however, regained the upper hand. They were able to prevent the replacement of English by Assamese as means of instruction at the universities in Assam.²²

This anti-Bengali complex was aggravated by another component, i.e. the large-scale immigration of the Muslim "East Bengal colonists". This influx had been exacerbated by the "grow more food"-campaign, propagated by Saadulla's Muslim League Ministry in the 1940s. On account of this campaign, the political tensions increased immediately, while long-range economic conflicts sharpened. In view of the forthcoming partition, the campaign was meant to enlarge the Bengali Muslim dominated districts and to prepare the ground for their incorporation into the new state of Pakistan.

Economically, the newly settled Bengali Muslims entered into rivalry with the Bengali Hindus with regard to land and jobs in rice cultivation on the banks of the Brahmaputra river. Both communities were economically more active than the Assamese. The latter, as far as they were landowners, avoided a conflict by leasing plots of land to both Bengali communities. Only in the 1960s and 1970s the Bengali tenants started to demand ownership rights for the land they were tilling and thereby shifted the confrontation between the Bengalis of both religions on the one hand and the Assamese landowners on the other.

Preceding each of the censuses in 1951, 1961, and 1971, the Bengali Muslims were especially pressurized by the Assamese Hindus. The Assamese wanted to ensure that the Bengali Muslims who used to "Assamize" willingly in the past, would continue to opt for the Assamese language. Yet, here too, a shift of confrontation seems to have begun in the 1970s. The permanent influx of Bangladeshi refugees not only increased the numerical strength of the Bengali

Muslims but also contributed to their rising self-esteem so much so that the Assamese feared that they would turn to their own language in the 1981 census. This has to be seen as one of the reasons for the anti-census agitation.

Lines of confrontation are also reflected in the party preferences of Assam's electorate. The left parties in general and the CPI(M) in particular, because of its stronghold in West Bengal, were perceived by the Assamese as the avant-garde of the Bengali Hindus. Correspondingly, CPI(M) and CPI were mainly supported by Bengali Hindus and some of the tribals (Plains Tribals). Bengali Muslims voted preferentially for the Congress and, after the 1978 split, for the Congress (I). The Janata Party recruited its supporters mostly among the Assamese. What the then Congress President, Devkant Borooah, said before the 1978 Assembly Election was still more valid for the 1983 elections. At that time he referred to the immigrants as vote banks for the Congress: "Ali, Collie, Bangalee, nak chepta Nepali"²³ (Ali = Muslim; Coolie = tea garden labourers from Bihar; Bangalee = Bengali Hindu who wished to keep in with the ruling party; nak chepta Nepali = the snub-nosed Nepali who occupied forest land).

The newly gained political self-confidence can be proved by another indicator. For the first time, as many as 24 Muslims were elected to the State Assembly in 1978.

These examples illustrate the gradually shifting lines of confrontation, the emergence of new alliances, the diversification of the conflict and can, thus, be regarded as indicators for the far-reaching social change of the Assamese society since 1947. The indigenous population perceived this change as a threat to its privileges. As can be seen from Sharma's quotation above, the Assamese would be able to adjust to this change only if they could realise their actual strength and capability to absorb and integrate alien influences.

In view of this complex situation, the uncompromising positions of the main contenders with regard to the central issue, the cut-off year for identifying foreigners, becomes clear. The agitation leaders insisted on 1951 as cut-off year and, in the meantime, conceded 1961 as the very last compromise. The Central Government adhered to 1971, the year in which Bangladesh emerged. With regard to each of the contenders, one has to distinguish between the overt political compulsions which limit further manoeuvrability and the underlying resistance which prevents a determined attempt to reach a compromise.

Mrs. Gandhi's reference to the constraints of the bilateral agreements with Bangladesh is in recognition of the

informal understanding reached between her and Mujibur Rahman in 1971 providing for a repatriation only of those Bangladeshi refugees who crossed over the border after March 26, 1971, which is the official founding day of Bangladesh.

According to this understanding, all refugees who entered into Indian territory before that date would be offered asylum in India. Initially, Mrs. Gandhi states that those immigrants who had arrived after 1971 had been deported, but subsequently admitted that this was not so. She maintains, however, that the number of those who had remained behind was small.

With regard to the other demand, i.e. to close the "open" border with Bangladesh or at least to secure a more efficient border control, her grounds for justification of her refusal are twofold: (a) the geographical localities such as many small rivers and inaccessible areas prevent a thorough check of the border; and (b) the Indo-Bangladesh Border Agreement of 1975 provides for certain restrictions along the border. For example, within a distance of 150 meters on both sides of the border line no defence installations are allowed or troops to be posted.

The underlying motivation for the Congress (I) rigid positions is obvious. It would lose its major vote bank in Assam if serious attempts were undertaken to identify and deport the illegal residents. Apart from this, Mrs. Gandhi takes advantage of the refusal of the Bangladesh Government as well as that by other Indian state governments to agree to any deportation or resettlement. It remains doubtful whether her post-election promises such as erecting a fence along the 2500 mile border and improving the number and efficiency of the border posts, will actually be implemented and whether they will meet their purpose.

The agitation leaders justify their stand with reference to Article 326 of the Indian constitution according to which only Indian citizens can be enrolled on the voters' lists. The National Register of Citizens of 1951 and the voters' lists for the first National Elections in 1952 have to be used as the base for identifying foreigners. That would provide for 1951 as cut-off year. The concession of 1961 as cut-off year does not overrule their basic argumentation.

Their underlying motivation has to be seen in the above described fear of Bengali dominance. The identity crisis among the Assamese speaking population increased the fear of their being reduced to a minority in their own state - as it has already happened in two neighbouring states, i.e. Sikkim and Tripura.

These psychological factors are the main reason for the mass support which the agitators received from a large number of regional political parties, social and cultural institutions, professional associations and all kinds of social groups in the towns as well as in the country. This is even admitted by their strongest critics.²⁴

Equally important is the economic situation. The socio-economic change which Assam underwent since independence diminished the political influence of vested Assamese interests groups and the economic backwardness deteriorated job and career opportunities especially of the younger Assamese. This factor attributes an urban middle class character to the leadership of the agitation.²⁵ Yet, the leaders not only expressed their own economic concern but voiced a common resentment among the Assamese. They accuse the Central Government of depriving Assam of the benefits of its rich natural resources. To mention just two examples:

Assam produces more than half of India's tea (in 1977-78: 53 per cent), but most of it is auctioned outside of the state thus depriving the Assamese state of a large portion of revenues from tea auction. In 1961, 74 per cent of Assam's tea was auctioned outside, namely in Calcutta and London. Only in 1970, an indigenous auction centre was established in Gauhati, thus gradually reducing the share of tea auctioned outside. In 1978, the situation had improved to such an extent that only 53 per cent was sold outside.²⁶

Another example is oil. Assam produced between 20-25 per cent of India's crude oil. An agitators' publication of 1980 states that out of the total value of approximately Rs. 8400 million Assam received only royalties worth Rs. 220 million, while the refinery at Barauni/Bihar earned royalties from Assam's crude oil worth Rs. 600 million.

One can dispute at what rate royalties should be paid to a member state within a national economy. Yet, beyond controversy is another indicator given by the agitators. Assam has only three small refineries within its state boundaries which have a combined capacity of only 1.81 million tons. Barauni, however, alone has a capacity of 3.60 million tons although it obtains its crude oil from Assam via a 1,158 km long pipeline from Noonmati/Assam.²⁷

Though the shock resulting from the election massacres gave a severe blow to the agitation, one can expect that it will regain its momentum. The political overtones will soften and tactics will change. Yet, the basic socio-economic grievances among the Assamese still remain and can easily find expression in a new phase of the movement.

Footnotes

- ¹ The Indian newsmagazine "India Today", vol.VIII, No.5, 15.3.1983, carried a photo of one of the massacres on its cover and started with a detailed background report about the tragedy in Assam. On 4.5.1983 in the Lok Sabha, the Union Minister for Home Affairs, P.C. Sethi, referred to such reports in his statement on the situation in Assam: "However, we are intrigued by a coincidence. When Heads of States from all over the world had assembled in New Delhi in connection with the Non-aligned-meeting, some newspapers and periodicals chose to come out with graphic pictures on the killings in Assam."
He tried to minimize the importance of such reports by accusing the journalists of misusing the events for purposes of sensation. But it was too late. Week by week, new background reports disclosed the tactics used by the Central Government during the clashes in Assam.
- ² H.N. Barua, Assam's struggle for survival, publ. by Assam Freedom Fighters' Association, Gauhati 1980, p.40.
- ³ Atul Goswami, Migration into Assam: 1901-1971: Demographic Dimensions, in: Pankaj Thakur (ed.), India's North-East. A multi-faceted view, Tinsukia/Assam (1983), pp.50-51.
- ⁴ Influx of foreign nationals and the present movement, by K.C. Barua on behalf of Asom Yuvak Samaj, Gauhati 1980, p.7.
- ⁵ India Today, vol.VIII, no.4, 28.2.1983, p.13.
- ⁶ India Today, 15.3.1983, p.18.
- ⁷ Arun Shourie in: India Today, 31.5.1983, p.57. In his two Special Reports on the Assam Elections in India Today (vol.VIII, no.9, 15.5.1983 and no.10, 31.5.1983), he quotes a number of internal or classified Government orders and reports. These facts proved for the first time the former presumptions about the Government's intentions and procedure.
- ⁸ Shourie in: India Today, 31.5.1983, pp.52-53.
- ⁹ Shourie in: India Today, 31.5.1983, p.54.
- ¹⁰ G.K. Reddy, Violence may force emergency in Assam, in: The Hindu, 21.2.1983.
- ¹¹ A.S. Abraham, North-Eastern Discontents, in: Times of India, 25.2.1983.
- ¹² The "Seven Sisters" comprise Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura.
- ¹³ Asam Sahitya Sabha, Eclipse in the East. An analysis of the present agitation in Assam. Gauhati 1980, pp.7-8.

- ¹⁴ Quoted from Shourie, *India Today*, 31.5.1983, p.55.
- ¹⁵ S.L. Shakhder was explicitly asked about the possibility of postponing the Assam Elections. Quoted from Inderjit, *Can Assam poll be postponed?*, in: *Economic Times*, 8.2.1983. Interestingly enough, Shakhder's successor, Trivedi, in fact recommended on Febr.17 to postpone the last round of polling, scheduled for Febr.20, in view of the large-scale violence. The Central Government pretended not to have received his letter in time.
- ¹⁶ Shourie in: *India Today*, 31.5.1983, p.51.
- ¹⁷ "Asom" is pronounced as "Ahom".
- ¹⁸ K.M. Sharma, *The Assam question. A historical perspective*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.15, no.31, 2.8.1980, p.1321.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ Shourie in: *India Today*, 31.5.1983, p.57.
- ²¹ Praful Bidwai, *Assam on a short fuse*, in: *Times of India*, 21.3.1983.
- ²² For details see Myron Weiner, *Sons of the soil. Migration and ethnic conflict in India*. Princeton 1978, pp.117-124.
- ²³ *India Today*, vol.V, no.8, 29.2.1980, p.42.
- ²⁴ To quote just one example from a Marxist author: "Over the months, the movement demonstrated that it could mobilise hundreds and thousands of people without disturbing peace or creating violence, if it so wished." Amalendu Guha, *Little Nationalisms Turned Chauvinist. Assam's anti-foreigner upsurge, 1979-80*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number 1980, p.1707.
- ²⁵ For details see for example Myron Weiner, *The political demography of Assam's anti-immigrants movement*, in: *Population and Development Review* 9, No.2 (June 1983), p.286.
- ²⁶ Nawab Akhtar, *Assam Crisis I + II*, *Economic Times*, 11. + 12.11.1983.
- ²⁷ *Assam's struggle for survival*, p.48.