

**CHALLENGE  
CHALLENGE  
TO  
INDIA'S UNITY**

**Assam Students' Agitation and Government**

**D. P. KUMAR**

This book gives an account of how during early history, Assam came to be inhabited by a variety of ethnic communities and how in the later years the State got divided into five States, forming part of what is now called the 'Seven Sister States', the people of the newly-emerging States succeeding in asserting their respective identity or language. Assam's demographic map had further come to be blurred from the beginning of this century, first with the migration of people from the eastern part of Bengal and later after the Partition of India, by the illegal entry of people from Bangladesh. The book depicts how a mass infiltration of foreigners led to the building up of a prolonged anti-foreigner movement to throw out the foreigners. The six-year long agitation by the All Assam Students' Union ended in the signing of an Assam Accord and the emergence into power of a youthful Asom Gana Parishad Government in Assam, indeed a students' government for the first time in India, and probably anywhere else in the world. But as time wore on, the AGP when in power was unable to get the foreigners expelled despite its striving hard for it and engaging into a running battle with the Central Government. The agitation seemed to have been in vain. Meanwhile, internal strife has developed to make the AGP government shaky, and on the top of it, demands have been intensified by the Plains and Hills tribals in Assam for the creation of separate States, threatening a balkanisation of an already truncated Assam.

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D.P. KUMAR

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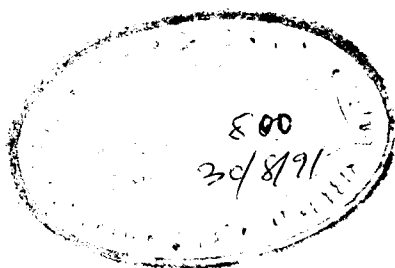
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# 1

## ASSAM CRISIS—CHALLENGE TO INDIA'S UNITY

### An Introduction

In the ancient past, which can be traced back to four millenia, streams of humanity belonging to Austric races, Tibeto-Burmans, Indo-Aryans and Ahoms poured into the Assamese land, and lastly came the Moghuls, forming one people and losing their identity. The Ahoms who ruled the land before the advent of the British in Assam had come from Thailand. They ruled between the 13th and 19th centuries and are the forerunners of the ethnic Assamese community. The British conquered Assam in 1826. Indo-Aryans, including people from neighbouring Bengal, also came and settled down in the pre-British period, but actually it is when the British came that they brought with them Bengali 'babus' educated in English medium schools and trained in white collar and managerial, or technical jobs to run the railways, communication systems, oil installations, tea plantations and other establishments. With the Partition of Bengal in 1905, large-scale migration of Muslims began from the eastern part of Bengal, pushing up the Muslim population of Assam. In the late 30s, the then Chief Minister, Saadullah, officially encouraged this migration on the pretext of boosting the 'Grow More Food' campaign. Later, the Muslim League plans to increase Muslim population in Assam was given a boost by the Muslim League Chief Minister in Bengal, Suhrawardy, and his counterpart in Assam, Saadullah. The idea fitted into Muslim League's scheme of creating Pakistan on the eastern flank of India. This migration of population from eastern part of erstwhile Bengal to Assam was thus initially encouraged by the British rulers and then deliberately planned by the Muslim League to populate Assam with a political motive and the plan executed systematically by the Muslim League regimes in Bengal and Assam in pre-partition India.

The outcome was that with the coming in into Assam of vast number of Bengali-speaking people, both Hindus and Muslims, the ethnic and linguistic balance was disturbed and ethnic and linguistic relations strained.

With the Partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947, Muslim-majority Sylhet went to East Pakistan, but Assam was saved by Gopinath Bardoloi and Sardar Patel from going to East Pakistan. Also, with the partitioning of India, there was a deluge of refugees who fled East Pakistan to take shelter in India—especially in neighbouring West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Bihar. This ought to have been stopped after things settled down, but it was not and there was an unending stream of foreigners entering into Assam clandestinely all the while. As a result between 1901 and 1951, Assam's population increased by nearly 35 per cent per decade, as against its own population growth of 20 per cent per decade. This was much higher than the all-India average, except of West Bengal and Tripura, where too streams of people were coming from East Pakistan. In Tripura, refugees overran the local population and became the majority there. During and after the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, there was another influx of population from East Pakistan into Assam, West Bengal and Tripura—of people driven out of their homes by communal killings. The illegal migration continued right up to 1971 when Bangladesh came into existence, when Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman gave assurance of protection to the Hindus in Bangladesh. Migrant foreign population (almost wholly from East Pakistan and a few hundred thousand from Nepal), in Assam increased by 22.94 per cent in the decade between 1931 and 1941, 26.17 per cent between 1941 and 1951, nearly 35 per cent between 1951 and 1961 and again nearly 35 per cent between 1961 and 1971. (The 1981 Census could not be held because of Assam agitation for expulsion of foreigners). The Muslim population in Assam which was 9 per cent in the 1881 census, rose to 19 per cent in the 1931 Census, to 23 per cent in 1941 Census, to 24.68 per cent in 1951, to as much as 38.37 per cent in 1961 and was 30.99 per cent in 1971. The notable point in all this was that, after the Partition of the country into India and Pakistan, Hindus fled East Pakistan, driven away from their hearths and homes. But in spite of the fact that India and Pakistan were created on the basis of religion, that is Hinduism and Islam, very large chunks of Muslims migrated from

their homeland and forced their way into Assam (and also, of course, to West Bengal, Tripura and other places in India), admittedly in search of better economic opportunities and in Assam mainly to grab land—tribal, forest and riverine (char). The impact of all this was grave on Assam's population pattern, its economy, its politics, its cultural and linguistic personality, and endangering the very identity of the Assamese, as they later on contended.

Strangely, migration did not stop even after the creation of Bangladesh and has continued till to this day, though after 1971, and particularly after the Assam agitation, it has slowed down. (But again when Bangladesh declared itself in 1988 as an Islamic State, there has again been a torrent of refugees flowing particularly into West Bengal. Almost the entire 'Chakma' tribe, who are Buddhists, have also been driven away from Bangladesh to India). The time thus came when this unbridled crossing over of a stream of humanity from another country into Assam threatened to inundate the local population, break up the economy of the State and distort the political set-up, and what is more, the presence of a vast mass of foreigners posed a danger to the security and integrity of Assam and of India.

### **Foreigners in Assam**

The difficulties of the Assamese people on account of the presence of a large number of foreigners became more and more acute until in 1979, they reached the end of their patience and the All Assam Students' Union launched a massive movement to turn out the foreigners, when it was found, on checking up the electoral rolls, that in a Lok Sabha byelection from Mangaldoi ordered in September of that year, there were more than 45,000 names of foreigners in a list of nearly 7,00,000 voters. The massive agitation across the entire length and breadth of Assam asked for identifying the huge number of people in the State who were not citizens of the State or of the country, and deporting them to where they had come from.

Prior to this, in the 1960s and 1970s, the AASU had launched movements on the issue of language and succeeded in getting accepted by the Government Assamese as the official language of the State. It was a bilingual State earlier with Assamese and Bengali as official languages. There were also 'push backs' (deportation of

people to East Pakistan), 'Bangal-kheda' ('drive out the Bengalis') and the movement against the 'Bahiragatas' ('outsiders') at different times in the 1960s and 1970s, but in 1979, it abruptly took the shape of an anti-foreigner agitation with the character of the movement changed altogether. The AASU asked for detection of the foreigners under the Foreigners' Act, 1946, their deportation and deletion of their names from the electoral rolls. In the beginning, the movement had betrayed an anti-India character, with separatist slogans such as 'Indian dogs, go back' etc. raised through wall-writings but it retrieved itself immediately from degenerating, to give itself the shape of a nationalist movement. It succeeded in its aims to awaken the consciousness of the people of Assam and of the rest of India to the 'demographic invasion' that had been taking place and foreigners taking over in Assam. As the movement got into full swing the Central Government which had been evading the issue for long was forced to take cognisance of it and of the paradox of millions of citizens coming from a foreign land and forcing themselves in India. But the Central Government even then dilly-dallied and went into prolonged and threadbare argument with the AASU leaders on the legal and constitutional aspects of the migration, and when this did not hold much water, appealed to the AASU leadership to accept the bulk of the immigrants on compassionate and 'humanitarian considerations' as also India's national and international obligations. It looked like an almost interminable negotiation with the agitation leaders, at times the leaders of the Opposition parties being associated in tripartite conferences, and various formulae were discussed to find a solution of what to do with the extraordinarily large number of foreigners in Assam. Indeed, it looked as if Indira Gandhi who was then the Prime Minister did not really wish to resolve the problem and wanted it to hang on. She could either have thought that the agitation would peter out and the agitators would tire of it, or it would resolve itself on its own one day.

Side by side, on another frontier of the country in the west, an Akali agitation was also on, in Punjab, where the Akali Sikhs were fighting for their various religious and territorial demands and for a larger share in the river-waters. Indira Gandhi allowed this agitation also to drag on and become more and more complicated as years wore on. After her crucial defeat in the 1977 election, Indira Gandhi had probably lost the will and capacity to tackle the major problems

confronting the nation, and particularly the two major agitations in the eastern and western flanks of the country.

At last the Punjab agitation took a catastrophic turn. The Akalis began making political demands, based on the separatist Anandpur Sahib Resolution. This Resolution passed nearly 10 years before, asked for the creation of "an independent Punjab within an independent India", whatever that might have meant. Eventually, the Akali agitation went out of hands of Akali politicians and terrorists asking for 'Khalistan', came up on the scene and took over. The Punjab situation then went out of the control of even the normal law and order enforcing authorities. The Army had to be called in the Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush terrorists out of the holy shrine in what was called 'Bluestar Operation'. Tragically, in less than five months thereafter, on October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi fell a victim at the hands of two Sikh assassins, her own security guards, who wanted to take revenge against her, for their holy shrine had been desecrated.

But before this, in her bid to defuse the situation in Assam and to force a political solution of the Assam problem, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered an election to the Assam Assembly (which had been dissolved earlier). It was a totally misconceived step. The atmosphere was thick with distrust, suspicion and animosity. A spirit of violence was in the air, for the agitation had gone on too long embittering the relationship among the different communities and linguistic groups in the three years of the agitation, and as the poll began, it led to a massacre, almost each community running at the throat of the other. The carnage toll mounted to more than 3,000. It was one of the worst decisions of Indira Gandhi in her political career. But even then she went on evading the Assam issue. The long agitation had paralysed life and development activity in Assam and adjoining States, whose lifeline, the roads and the railways, lay through Assam. It went to the credit of the agitation leaders that they conducted their movement on democratic lines and through peaceful ways of protest, violence and killings being only aberrations for most of the agitation. The outbreak of the communal carnage in 1983 was a separate chapter. It was mainly ethnic in character, caused by ethnic tensions and conflicts for all of which the AASU could not be blamed. The adamant attitude of the Government not to find a solution of the Assam agitation and to delay the process of

a settlement which generated tension and ill-will was far more responsible for the carnage than anything else.

After Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister, he reached an Accord with the Akali Dal leader, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, on July 24, 1985, in his bid to solve the long drawn-out Punjab problem. Soon thereafter, on August 15, 1985, he signed another Accord with the AASU leaders, ushering in an era of conciliation in the strife-torn Assam, which led to an Assembly election in Assam bringing to power a students' government in a spectacular turnout.

### **Problem Papered Over**

However, the Agreement only seemingly solved the problem of foreigners, which basically remained, and still remains to be solved. More than three years after the Accord and the Assom Gana Parishad coming to power, it has not been possible to detect 'more than 150 or so foreigners' in the words of the Prime Minister. There is little hope of any foreigner being deported. Some who were deported to Bangladesh have come back by another route. According to the Accord those immigrants who came to Assam from March 24, 1971 onwards were to be detected and deported. The AASU had estimated them to be about a million. According to statistics supplied by the AASU, nearly four million foreigners had forcibly entered Assam before March 24, 1975 when Bangladesh came into existence. Thus a total of nearly five million foreigners, according to the AASU's version, out of a total population of nearly 22 million, still remain in Assam. The presence of the large number of foreigners is not to the liking of the Assamese people. This may cause frictions in future. A conflict situation still remains. The malady is inherent in the background of the six years of anti-foreigner agitation and the population structure as it has shaped up in Assam over the years. The 'Assam problem' has really been papered over for a while.

What has also happened, meanwhile, is that the former State of Assam has been between 1962 and 1972, divided in five parts: Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The division has taken place to meet the sentiments of the people of Nagaland, Meghalaya etc. who wanted to be separated from Assam either on political grounds or on considerations of language. They did not want the domination of the Assamese language or the

Assamese people. There has always been an incipient separatist feeling in at least two more areas, which still remain in Assam—Cachar and the Plains tribals. areas north of the Brahmaputra river—where the Bengalis and Plains tribals people resent imposition of Assamese language and dominance. In the past there have been demands from these areas for the formation of two Union Territories, one to be called 'Purvanchal' for Cachar-Karimganj, and the other for the plains tribals areas, who want their Union Territory to be christened as 'Udayachal', or even 'Bodoland'. Just as the Assamese people in the old days resented the imposition of Bengali language and Bengali domination in Assam, Bengalis and plains tribal people are now reacting in the same manner.

The ruling youthful government of Assom Gana Parishad has thus inherited a peculiar legacy. The Assamese students were fighting against the domination of others. Paradoxically, now others seem to be fighting against the Assamese dominance and in a much smaller State that Assam is today. It is thus a reaction in the reverse, threatening to cut up Assam in ever more parts in future, with the dreadful prospect of a total balkanization of Assam.

It is to guard against this that the AASU leaders had secured in the Accord a provision that would give Constitutional and legal protection to Assamese ethnic identity and language. Now finding resistance to Assamese language in Cachar and the proposed 'Udayachal' area, the AASU and AGP are demanding a special status for Assam under Article 370 of the Constitution (as in Jammu and Kashmir) and also Constitutional safeguards to ensure that no further area would be cut out of Assam and ceded to other States or Union territories, and that the people of Cachar and those of the Plains tribals areas would be compelled to fall in line with the language policy.

The demand for Constitutional and legal guarantees asked for by the AASU have not been conceded by the Centre, so that a new conflict is again arising between the Centre and Assam. The Assam Government leaders are vehemently criticizing the Centre's attitude in not amending the laws without which the State Government contends it cannot proceed with the detection of foreigners and deport them or disperse them out of the State. The AASU had restarted an agitation within a year of the AGP getting into the seat

of government, and hot words have again begun to be exchanged between the State and the Centre.

It is clear that if the 'demographic invasion' which was a threat to the security of Assam and therefore of India's north-east had not been checked, it would have by now completely swamped and engulfed more parts of the north-east, resulting presumably in a grave danger some day. To that extent the Assam agitation played a role in safeguarding national security and integrity. At a time of crisis or conflict in the international border in future, particularly in regions inhabited by foreigners, India's frontiers might be exposed to grave risks. As has been described in the following pages, at the time of the invasion by China in 1962 in the Himalayas, when the Chinese forces were descending the mountain slopes in the north-east, and heading towards the foothill town of Tezpur, a large number of illegal immigrants who had migrated from East Pakistan clandestinely and settled in Tezpur and areas surrounding it, raised Pakistani flags hailing the invading Chinese forces, still on the mountain slopes below the Se-La Pass. They had hailed them with open arms, raising welcoming slogans. It was one of the gravest moment of history when Assam which is linked tenuously with the rest of India by a narrow land area was about to be cut off by the Chinese invasion. Fortunately, a catastrophic situation was averted by the decision of the Chinese Army itself to trek back and not to push ahead with their attack. If they had, those areas would have come under Chinese occupation with obliging and friendly illegal immigrants welcoming them. A similar situation may not arise again, but if it does, who can vouch for how foreigners, now more numerous, making for a larger presence, will behave. The Assam agitators had drawn the attention of the rest of India to this aspect again and again, pointing out the danger of allowing thousands upon thousands of foreigners to live and settle down in Assam and in India, and particularly in the border areas. Senior Congress (I) leaders too even now apprehend danger to India's security should India's borders in the East and North are aflame again. Again, huge masses of foreigners who have migrated from East Pakistan or Bangladesh are concentrated in districts like Goalpara and Dhubri adjoining Bangladesh. Indo-Bangladesh relations may not be on an even keel all the time. In a possible future conflagration in the region, none can predict what the developments can be. Here lies

the problem of India's security. The darker side of the Assam problem thus remains unresolved. Hundreds of thousands of foreigners still remain in Assam, posing a question mark.

Infiltrators are not the only threat to security. When the AASU leaders had despaired of long years of a fruitless agitation and were getting impatient there rose from out of them a few who reached the conclusion that no solution of the foreigners' problem could come by adopting a democratic and peaceful path. Inside the AASU, they acted first as a pressure group and later went on to form, a front to take to extremist path to achieve their objective. Thus came into existence underground groups, such as United Liberation Front of Assam and the Assam Progressive Liberation Front. It is thus that extremists and terrorists came up on the scene in Assam—because the Centre was not keen to solve the problem of intruders and was oblivious of the consequences that the problem could lead to, as it did in Punjab as well. The ULFA blamed the AASU for bending its knees before the Centre and being soft to the Centre during the prolonged negotiations. The ULFA not only took to the path of extremism and terrorism, but went ahead and joined hands with insurgents and insurrectionaries. There were conditions around which were propitious for this. There had been a perennial unrest among the Nagas, Mizos and other tribals in the north-east of India who at different times, resorted to insurgency and insurrectionary agitations. Assam, could not remain free from it for long especially the way the Centre dealt with the problems there in a callous manner. In time, the ULFA extremists got in touch with the main terrorist and insurgency organization of the north-east, the Naga Socialist Nationalist Council. Its activists received training in arms with the NSCN insurgents in the Samrah tract of Burma and also procured arms and ammunitions through the NSCN. In propagating an extreme path, the ULFA went to the extent of asking for separation of Assam from the rest of the country, and accusing the AASU and AGP of having compromised their stand and reaching an agreement with the Centre which was 'unjust' to Assam, for the sake of "getting into power and becoming Ministers." The ULFA at a later stage of desperation even went to the extent propagated an extreme path, championing the cause of Assamese sub-nationalism and asking for separation of Assam from the rest of the country. They raised the demand for an Independent Assam.

The Assam Accord and the rise of the AGP to power has not also solved the problems the AASU had started out with. No substantial progress has been made in terms of detecting the foreigners or deporting them, nor in terms of crossing their names out from the voters' list, so that they freely exercised their franchise not only in the 1985 elections, but are hoping to do so in future elections as well. The Assam Accord appeared to have come to naught even after three and a half years. The Assamese leaders were totally disillusioned that nothing can be done about the foreigners, who would live in Assam permanently. The electoral rolls too were unrevised and were filled with the names of foreigners as voters. The only consolation was that because of the agitation, the flow of infiltrators had dwindled.