

SPOTLIGHT ON ASSAM

S. K. DAS

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Assam is an exceptionally absorbing yet the least explored state of India. In 1946, the Cabinet Mission proposed and the national leaders agreed that entire Assam be included in Part 'C' Territory which had to constitute 'East Pakistan' (now Bangladesh) presumably taking it to be a muslim majority 'province'. Lokapriya Bordoloi enlightened the all India leadership and saved Assam from being dumped into 'East Pakistan'. Since then till the date, it has been the most talked about state of the country. Unfortunately the state is inadequately explored, generally misconstrued or misunderstood. Knowledgeable Indians yet view it like a curate's egg or as the blind men described an elephant. In this sense, Assam is yet neglected.

Articles in this book provide an inquisitive approach absolutely free from any pre-conceived notion. Though not all pervading nor can claim to have depicted a total picture, at any rate it gives a new look to a set of vexed issues of the state.

Indeed it is no small compliment that a scholar considered the main article : "Immigration and Demographic Transformation..." to have provided "a stronger statistical Base than (Myron) Weiner's "Sons of the Soil". (The Telegraph, Calcutta, Sep. 8, 1985).

Though an economist by instinct, author of this compilation, S.K. Das, has an urge to go deep into Assam's social, economic and ethnic issues. This comes from his genuine love for Assam : a 'province' where he was born, a state where he has built his academic base, a state to serve which he could overcome some prized prospects outside. Shri Das has come back to teach economics at Karimganj College after serving National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi, as consultant of a study to indicate feasible directions of reform of Sales Taxes of West Bengal as commissioned in the N.I.P.F.P. by the Govt. of West Bengal, 1982-83. The report in book form "The Sales Tax System in West Bengal" is published by N.I.P.F.P. (Co-Author, Dr. A. Bagchi) and is considered to have evolved a blue print for restructuring the Sales Tax System of other states as well.

Passing matriculation in 1950, he did his I.A. in 1952, B.A., 1954 and M.A. in Economics, 1956 and Diploma in Statistics, 1971—all from the Gauhati University. He did his Ph.D. in Economics as a Teacher fellow under F.I.P. of the U.G.C. from J.N.U. New Delhi in 1983. In the meantime, another of his publication : "Dynamics of Taxation in a Developing Economy with Special Reference to Assam..." has got high appreciations from experts and critics. In view of all this, the Gauhati University has nominated him as an out-station Ph.D. research guide in Economics.

His style is lucid, vocabulary simple, methodology logical and the way of interpretation thought-generating.

Spotlight on Assam

Susanta K. Dass



1989

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Dedicated to
In Memory of his elder sister

USHA
(1926-1956)

who passed away long before others do.

Author

Foreword

It is a pleasure to write foreword of the book : Spotlight on Assam. Author Susanta Krishna Dass did a meaningful job writing a set of articles during a time when an approach of such style and axis was needed most in the interest of Assam's integrity and progress.

Assam is a unique state for several reasons. First, it is world's smallest geographical region sheltering largest number of ethnic identities who speak varied languages and dialects. Many of these people still survive with their own life style and culture without, however, depicting any cleavage to the theme : Unity in diversity.

Second, from antiquity to the present, Assam demonstrates continuity of immigration. If migration of people from one to other places of the earth is a normal demographic feature, each such instance had an end-point, but in case of Assam there is no end as such to this in-flow. If to the 'Shan' it was a country full of gardens of gold, 'Mungdun Shun Kham', Assam still beckons outsiders by its economic potentialities and expectations.

Finally, the heterogeneous ethnic, linguistic and cultural composition of Assam made it 'a veritable buble' and 'a

paradise for anthropologists, philologists and sociologists' alike.

While most of the studies are oriented academically and have made open a wide range of knowledge, a few have generated, may be tacitly, a susceptible sense of identity—consciousness and tension among the varied people. It is this tension that has brought to the surface the 'Bhumsputra', Sons of the Soil, theme and made it a talk not only of Assam and the north eastern region but spreading gradually over a wide range of north and central India for a couple of decades now. In my long association with political and social life of Assam, I could recollect only one positive, rather blundering, instance of application of the 'Bhumiputra' theme. It was during the 'Referendum' in Sylhet, another unique instance in India's independence history that in the plea of not being 'the sons of the soil, about one and a half lakh tea garden labourers of Sylhet were disenfranchised. They were all Hindu. Being a marginally Muslim majority district and the tea labourers not allowed to vote, the 'axe' own (the Hindus of Sylhet fought the referendum, July, 1947 with the symbol of a 'thatched hut' and the Muslim with an 'axe'). But difference was marginal, of fifty one thousand votes only. So was an integral part of Assam since the 'province' was born, 1874, axed and swamped into 'East Pakistan'. The census, 1951 observes about this 'avoidable' second partition of country.

"This is the most important change in the area and boundaries of the new state of Assam—a part of the price that India had to pay before it could take its proud place as a sovereign, democratic republic in the comity of nations. Though Assam's loss in area as a result of *this partition* is negligible (it has lost only 1/8th of its existing area), it has lost vast paddy lands and the tea, lime and cement industries of Sylhet—the far reaching effects of this loss will continue to be felt by Assam as well as India for many years to come".

A similar observation was made by an Assamese Statesman. It was late Rohini Kumar Choudhury. The wane recapitulations come like flash-back. It was 1946. The Cabinet Mission proposed that the entire Assam be included in

Part 'C' territory which had to constitute 'East Pakistan'. An all-Assamese nationalist delegation with Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi moved the all-India leadership, Sardar Patel in particular. It was an upright move to save Assam.

The Cabinet Mission design was finally amended in the Mountbatten Plan. Assam would be in part 'A' territory, that is, in the Indian Union. A most welcome amendment indeed. Our hats off to the Saviours.

But for Sylhet in isolation the decision was completely the other way round. It would have a 'referendum'—to be or not to be in the Indian Union.

"Why a referendum? In the good days of Bengal we were chopped off and again on the eve of impending bad days as 'East Pakistan' why should we be dovetailed again?" People of Sylhet understandably asked. They also recapitulated what Kabiguru Rabindranath wrote about Sylhet's deprivation.

Sreebhumi—

"Cursed by the cruel spell of time,
Truncated and so exiled from the Lap of Sovereign
Bengal—
O Sreebhumi
Thou art so fair.
Her own hands active—
Holy as they are
And the blessed wreath spake
Bharati** ties they heart
With the heart and heart of Bengal.
For thee—
The tie that ties the blessings of Bengal
Lasts for all times to come.

(**The Goddess of learning, literature and culture.

Translation : Susanta Krishna Dass).

"What is our fault? If in Sylhet why not in Goalpara? Is not Sylhet a limb of Assam since the 'province' was born?" With these questions voiced and faces agony stricken, the

Hindus of Sylhet moved Late Basanta Kumar Das who was then Assam's Home Minister. Basanta Babu felt bewildered. He and some Hindu leaders of Sylhet rushed towards Delhi. On the way, in Calcutta, they met Late Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Choudhury was the lone member of the all-Assamese Bordoloi delegation who opposed referendum of Sylhet. As records show, he cautioned Bordoloi and other members not to do this mistake. "The problem would persist but not the land. So don't go for referendum".

If Rohini Choudhury's inference and the findings of Census, 1951 have any relevance with the subsequent politico-economic development of Assam is anybody's reading. But Sylhet's story of deprivation remained conceptually different from that of the partition of the country. The bad blood created by the two-nation theory already clouding the horizon of the sub-continent, the nightmare of the direct actions in Calcutta and Punjab fresh in memory, the stay of the Hindus of Sylhet in 'East Pakistan' was doubly staked due to their taking part in the referendum exposedly on Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, thus their time old Muslim neighbours and friends becoming direct antagonists. Here is an extra reason for too heavy migration of Hindus from Sylhet. There were many legal, historical and practical reasons for Hindus of Sylhet to turn to Assam. First, Sylhet was an integral part of Assam since the 'Province' was created. Second, thanks to Redcliffe Boundary Commission award, a part of the district comprising four thanas : Badarpur, Ratabari, Patharkandi and a part of former Karimganj (232 Sq Kms) was given back to Assam. This gave a "Sons of the Soil" footing to the people of Sylhet. Third, many Hindu employees of the Govt. of Assam opted to serve in India and came over to Assam, thus offering a 'drowning men's straw' to many of their relatives and friends coming uprooted. Further, many Hindus of Sylhet had already been staying in different parts of the then Assam as 'amlahs', teachers, doctors, lawyers, planters and 'babus' in Tea Industry and the like. Last but not the least, her twin sister, Cachar district was still in Assam, offering them 'a welcome smile'. "By the middle of 1949" the Census 1951 observes : "already 1,14,00 refugees were censused in Assam, and a

majority of them, nearly 60,000 were censused in the district of Cachar alone". No doubt this migration has opened a new dimension in Assam's already too complicated linguistic and ethnic questions, reaffirming the farsight of Rohini Kumar Choudhuary, to repeat, "The problem would persist but not the land".

Date back to post Yandaboo, 1926, the Assamese-Bangali antagonism is an aggravated manifestation of the conflict of Upper and Upper Middle Class interests. Ahoms had a rigidly stratified class structure. The nobles : Buragohain, Bargohain, Barpatra Gohain, Barbarua and Barphukan who constituted the 'Patra-Mantri' or Council of Ministers, were the king makers. These and others were the most privileged classes. These privileges were wiped out with the downfall of the Ahom rule and emergence of company administration since 1826. For setting up effective administration the company brought with it a set of Bengali 'Omlahs' who enjoyed the rulers' patronage. Soon the 'Omlahs' replaced the 'Ahom nobles' and the latter came in conflict with the former. True, the activities of the 'Omlahs' were motivated, questionable and provocative. But the Bengalis as a class were not so. I would wish to quote a complete passage from Dr. H.K. Barpujari, the former Assamese Historian, (Assam in the Days of the Company : 1826-1858) :

"The virtual monopoly of office in all the departments by the new-comers from Bengal, naturally, generated an ill-feeling and deep resentment among those for whom, hitherto, there was no other means of livelihood than Government service. Their feelings were, to a great extent, shared by their sympathisers and followers, and must have been accentuated during the years of administrative confusion when it was generally held that the Omlahs were the root of all evils. Robinson writes : 'All that the Assamese knew of the Bengalee character from observations of the life led by the Bengali Omlah employed in the country (is that he was) by no means a favourable specimen...thus they have a very low opinion of the virtue of the Bengalee'. Lieutenant Matthie, the Principal Assistant, Nowgang, on the other hand, once reported :

'On British Conquest of Assam, numerous...Bengalees...came to Assam, and under our system the Assamese were obliged to patronage them. They became the penmen of their petitions, accountants, often spokesmen at the councils; and to answer their own purpose instil into them a spirit for litigation... Assamese are also now not less corrupt or less given to accepting bribes, although they do not take the same precaution to avoid its detection. Nor merely the Omlahs of Bengal, almost all the officials, high and low, Assamese and non-Assamese, never failed to exploit the situation as best as they could, as has already been described, whenever an opportunity presented itself whether under early British Rule or during the short regime of Raja Purandar in Upper Assam. It must also be clearly understood that the Omlahs were not the true representative of Bengal. It will be, of course, not far from the truth to say that, at the beginning, most of the new-comers were, mere fortune seekers, and in due course, many of them settled down permanently and linked themselves with the people of the soil. Better facilities of transport and communication, in the meantime, encouraged a few of the Assamese to proceed to the presidency in pursuit of trade or higher education, which enabled them to have a correct picture of the Bengalees. Contacts like these, though slowly, not only removed much of their mutual prejudices and ill-feelings tended towards a process of assimilation which made itself apparent, particularly among the high caste Hindus, in the observance of their common festivals and religious ceremonies, in their dresses, customs and usages. The worship of the deities like Durma, Kali Chandi, Annapurna, some of which were introduced even during the later part of the Ahom rule, became common not only in the public but also in private residences, occasionally in accompaniment of Jatra or dance drama parties from Bengal. Musicians, drummers (of dhak and dhol) and dancers from Bengal began to add attraction and grandeur to the festivals and marriage ceremonies of well-to-do families. Assamese gentry evinced a liking for the Punjabi (long shirt), shawl and santipuri dhuti of the Bengalees and perhaps of their food and delicacies. Bengali newspapers and periodicals like the Samachar Darpan and the Samachar

Chandrika had Assamese subscribers, some of whom even supplied local news and contributed articles." (pp. 267-69).

The anti-Bengali feeling started engulfing the masses only since the beginning of this century. If during the early years the feeling was implicit. Mr. Mulan, the Superintendent of Census, 1931, brought it to the surface when he observed: "Probably the most important event in the province during the last 25 years likely to alter permanently the whole structure of the Assamese culture and civilization, has been the invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims from the districts of eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh. The invasion began sometime before 1911 and the census report of that year is the first report which makes mention of the advancing host. By 1921 the first army corps passed into Assam and conquered the district of Goalpara. It is sad but by no means improbable that in another 30 years, Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home".

In the meantime, however, the politics of Muslim League, that of Sir Muhammed Saadullah in particular, took the advantage of the then prevailing "aggressive linguistic nationalism" of the Assamese and returned all those Bengali Muslim immigrants as Assamese speakers. The nationalist Assamese had to swallow the queer pill and to neutralise the communal impact of Muslim in-coming, propagated the theory of communal balance by encouraging the Nepalese in-flow.

Since the last days of the British down to the mid-sixties, the issue remained a follow-up of the quibble of the high-ups, the aggressive linguistic nationalism becoming the modus operandi. A statesman of Sri Gopinath Bordoloi's eminence stated and reaffirmed a number of time that: "the newly accepted policy of his government was—Assam for the Assamese" (Shillong Times, August 29, 1947). A little earlier, Dr. B.K. Barua, an eminent scholar and Assamese litterateur had observed: "Culturally, racially and linguistically, every non-Assamese is a foreigner in Assam" (Assam Tribune, July 20, 1947). Even the first Indian Governor's speech in the Assam

Assembly was provocative : "The natives of Assam are now masters of their own house. They have a Government which is both responsible and responsive to them. They can take what steps are necessary for the encouragement and propagation of Assamese language and culture. The Bengalee has no longer the power, even if had the will, to impose anything on the people of the Hills and Valleys which constitute Assam". (Sir Akbar Hydari, Nov. 5, 1947, Assembly Speech).

Some Bengalees also reacted. For one, Sri Nirad C. Choudhury observed in *The Continent of Circe* : "The Mongoloid Ahoms only demonstrated the general law afresh. They have accepted Hindu culture from Bengal, and none but a mad man will say that their language is not a dialectical offshoot of Bengali. Even their war cry is corrupt Bengali. But in recent years they have developed a very strange sense of an Assamese collective personality. With that they have also acquired a violent hatred for the Bengalis, who brought them into the fold of Hindu civilization, if not civilization itself. Had they remained the primitives that they were when they came, like the Garos, Nagas, Khasis or Kukis, there certainly would not have been massacres". This fuelled and aggravated the cleavage rather than fostered a spirit of amity.

With the publication of Myron Weiner's 'Sons of the Soil', 1978, the situation turned highly sensitive. Weiner writes : "There themes persistently emerged in my interviews with Assamese. The first is that the Assamese view the Bengali Hindus as cultural imperialists who, if given the opportunity, will assimilate the Assamese. The second is that the Assamese view their own nationality as weak, not only do the Assamese lag behind the Bengalis in education and employment, but the Bengali language itself is seen as more advanced, its literary traditions stronger, and its cultural institutions dominating. Finally, argued the Assamese, Bengali cultural imperialism can only be met by linguistic nationalism; the very weakness of the Assamese as a nationality makes it necessary to pursue an assimilationist policy if they are themselves to avoid being assimilated" (p. 113).

Almost simultaneously Mr. S. L. Shakdar, then Chief Election Commissioner, enlightened the chief electoral officers of states at their all India Conference in Ootacamand, Sep. 24, 1978 about an apprehension which, the officers need take into cognizance: "I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states, specially in the north-eastern region, wherefrom disturbing reports are coming regarding large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make on the basis of 34.98 per cent between the two censuses the increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 per cent over the 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when the state may have to reckon with foreign nationals who may, in all probability, constitute a sizeable per cent, if not majority of the state".

From C.S. Mulan to S.L. Shakdar—all observations generated a widely held impression and apprehension, both in Assam and in the rest of the country as well. about Bengali infiltration in general, and Bengali Muslim infiltration in particular, in Assam. Now a journalist, Mr. M.V. Kamath, who was given a hero's welcome at Guwahati during his Assam visit in 1979 wrote: "The frustration is further fuelled by fears that in the not too distant future, they may be swamped by 'foreigner nationals', mostly Muslims from Bangladesh". (The Illustrated Weekly of India, January 20-26, 1980).

I describe the developments above to ventilate that the emotional side of the now familiar 'Sons of the Soil' theme had all along been highly sensitive and susceptible. The scholars and experts were often not as restraint, dispassionate and detached as they should be. Understandably, in the midst of this emotional contradictions, it would be difficult for a Bengalee researcher to go into the issues with emotion-free in-depth. It was likely to be doubly so because, the author is a victim of "the Second Partition of the Country", that is, the referendum of Sylhet. He migrated to Silchar in early 1948, got him admitted in the Govt. 'High' School and

had most of his education at the Gauhati University. He has seen many confrontations and charges over linguistic and cultural supremacy question. Given this background, it is not easy to overcome the tension which was most likely to cloud one's mind because of personal pessimism. But Shelley (nickname of the author younger brother-like to me, has overcome all becks of emotional excesses. Author has done this with considered credibility.

His love for Assam is genuine, I come to learn he was a member of the team that studied and suggested remedial measures of Sales Tax System in West Bengal (appointed by the Govt. of West Bengal, 1982-83). This study : 'The Sales Tax System in West Bengal', with Dr. A. Bagchi as co-author has been published by National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi. This work he did after he had done his Ph. D. in Economics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. After that he has left his high-income yielding job and joined his original job at Karimganj College, Assam, His point is that if he does not serve the state to which he belongs, his going to the J.N.U. as a U.G.C. teacher-fellow and the subsequent academic strive would not be meaningful. If this personal attitude confirms bonafide involvement and belonging, I would say, for this alone he could see Assam's vexed problem in the right perspective.

This is unquestionably a compilation of high order. It would be nice reading and informative for common men, useful to students, demographer and researchers to know Assam in the right perspective in some respects and to the politicians and policy framers alike to form correct opinion.

I wish "Spotlight on Assam" makes sway.

Silchar
8th June, 1988

Mohitosh Purkayastha

Acknowledgement

Articles of this compilation were written between May 10, 1980 and Jan. 17, 1987.

While each of these articles has a separate background and specific approach, the general idea was, first, to ventilate some of the issues of the vexed problem of 'Foreign Nationals' in Assam in the right axis; and second, to locate the real cause of Assam's deprivation.

The main article: Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam, 1891-1981, which was published in the Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay was reprinted in a number of dailies and periodicals. It was translated into some modern Indian languages too. One scholar wrote in the Telegraph, Calcutta that its statistical foundation was stronger than that of Myron Weiner's "Sons of the Soil". I also got many letters of appreciation. Most of these letters highlighted two points: first, that it has got to give a sound data base to one who wishes to see Assam in his own way and, second, the views were dispassionate and reasonably restraint. It has a background as well. On Feb. 2, 1980, the All Assam Students' Association submitted its first ever Memorandum to Mrs. Indira Gandhi. I was then a Teacher Fellow under the U.G.C. engaged in research work for Ph.D. at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal

Nehru University, New Delhi. I joined by assignment in July, 1978 when the cloud of agitation against 'Foreigner Nationals' was thickening in Assam for an impending depression. I was working on a topic with special reference to Assam. As such Assam was the data-source for my work. With the beginning of the agitation, field work of my study got bogged down because it led to virtual stalemate in all my data sources which were in Assam. Since I took the venture to off-rust my fossilised 'little learning' after more than 21 years of lecturership in an Assam College, students from Assam in general used to regard me as their teacher. This gave me an advantage to know all that had been occurring in and around the J.N.U. It was through this channel that I had the occasion to see some members of the A.A.S.U. delegation of Feb. 2, 1980 and to get a cyclostyled copy of their first memorandum. Other than expressing their views in friends' 'mejlis', the delegation members did not say anything in public.

In the meantime, Dr. Bipin Chandra, the noted progressive historian, gave a talk on impressions of his Assam visit at the Centre of Historical Studies, J.N.U. This was if my memory does not fail, followed by a seminar thrown by Sri Dinesh Goswami, M.P. and journalist Mr. Inder Jit. I could not agree with some statistical information and chronological facts these talkers cited. There were some very innocent and 'as is what is' style of interpretation of data which would go very much close to confirming the note of caution by which a 'pedagogue' cautions the beginners of statistics: "there are three types of lies: lie, damn lie and statistics". For example, a general view was that while during the decades 1951-61 and 1961-71 India's population grew by 21.64% and 24.80 per cent respectively, that of Assam increased by 34.97% and 34.95%. Assam's 13.33% and 10.15% higher growth rates confirm that this was absolutely due to 'infiltration of foreign nationals'. A complicated demographic issue need not be so simple, however. True, at first sight, it appears inferrable as such. In 1981 census, one finds that population explosion rate in Rajasthan, Gujrat, Haryana and U.P. are substantially higher than India's mean rate. Is it all due to migration? Other factors like age composition, distribution by religion, social

institutions, sex ratio, literacy rate, poverty ratio, physical and mental characteristics etc. largely and effectively influence the growth rate of population. I pleaded that all these are to be taken into consideration along with immigration to generalise conclusions, particularly when the issue in view is highly susceptible and emotional.

Some teachers and students of C.E.S.P./J.N.U. wanted me to hold a seminar and ventilate my views. First, I did it in a drawing-room sitting. The listeners, limited though, were very cordial but critically inquisitive. Any way, I got through. It was appreciated as well, confidence so generated, I did a number of seminars in different places of Delhi. Finally, I wrote the E.P.W. Special Article.

Articles in the 'Statesman' were written subsequently. The initiative was issue-based. As readers would notice, I did not write to support or to oppose this side or that. My view has been to highlight facts afresh and interpret those in the right axis.

It is evident that my Delhi stay was the premise of a humble beginning for me. There I got library and various secondary date-source facilities. I also could consult many experts who knew Assam depth. And above all, a student anew, thanks to the U.G.C. fellowship, I could devote the time needed to tackle such a vexed problem which, in the midst of domestic involvements, would hardly be possible.

It is a pleasure that Sri Mohitosh Purkayastha has written the foreword. A Gandhian since boyhood, Minister of Civil Supply, Assam, in the Sarat Sinha cabinet, a former Rajya Sabha member, his life style still bears the stamp of simplicity. I shall not use set codes : "I am greatly indebted to" or "I am grateful to" or the like—because all these would be just formal. Rather I should say, he has done what is most like him. I wish him live with his own view of life.

I take this opportunity to thank Editors, the 'Statesman', Calcutta and the 'E.P.W.', Bombay for giving consent to reprint the articles first published in those papers.

Finally, I must thank my publisher and his staff who took the trouble of giving it the final shape.

Susanta K. Dass

Karimganj,
14th June, 1988

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Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam, 1891-1981

Immigration into Assam since 1874, when it emerged as a full-fledged 'province' of the British empire, has been a unique case of its kind. Assam's immense economic potential, coupled with the reluctance of the indigenous people to do toilsome and hard work, and absence of capital and entrepreneurship made such immigration imperative. The very heavy density of population and pressure on land in the neighbouring East Bengal intensified the trend. Partition of the country led to more immigration.

The present study explains how immigration has transformed Assam's demographic map. The period under study is 1891-1981. Figures for the decade 1971-81 are derived from Government of India and Government of Assam sources and projections made therefrom. Data are adjusted in the light of the incorporation of the major part of Sylhet district into East Pakistan and the subsequent separation of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram from Assam.

Table 1 shows that Assam's population increase over these years has been always higher than that of the country as a whole. A comparative analysis of the rate of population increase in Assam and other states ('provinces') for 1901-51 also confirms this trend (Table 2). It is interesting to note from Table 2 that Assam's rate of population increase during 1901-51 has been the second highest in the world, exceeded only by Brazil (204.00 per cent).

A widely held belief is that the high rate of population increase of Assam has been due to heavy influx of the Hindu refugees from East Pakistan since 1951. But such belief is not supported by data. First, the link relative rate of increase of Assam's population has been always far above that of the country as a whole since 1901. Secondly, in the decade 1911-21 when India experienced a negative rate of population growth of -0.30 per cent, the lone instance of its kind in its history, Assam's rate of population increase, on the contrary, was as high as 20.77 per cent, the highest ever recorded. Thirdly, between 1901-41, Assam's population as a percentage of total population of India increased from 1.38 per cent to 2.10 per cent, the mean decennial rate of increase being 0.18 per cent. Between 1941-71, it has increased from 2.10 per cent to 2.67 per cent, the corresponding mean decennial rate being 0.19 per cent. Lastly, de-composed data of Table 2 show that while net variation rates for India and all other states were higher during 1921-51 than during 1901-21, for Assam the variation rate was higher between 1901-21 than that for 1921-51. This implies that the inflow of outsiders into Assam was heavier during 1901-21 than since 1921. All these suggest that there has been no unusual increase in the rate of growth of Assam's population since partition, the inflow of Hindu refugees from 'East Pakistan' notwithstanding. Rather, the gap between Assam's decennial rate of population increase and that of India which reached 13.33 per cent in 1961, the second highest in record, has since then been gradually, though very slowly, narrowing. It was 10.15 per cent in 1971 and is expected to be still lower in 1981 (projected gap is 10.00 per cent).

One point need to be explained here. It appears that there has been a big hike in the rate of increase of Assam's population, from 19.94 per cent to 34.97 per cent, between 1951-61. The same was the case in 1961-71 also. (The corresponding rates of growth for India were from 13.31 per cent to 21.64 per cent between 1951-61, and to 24.80 per cent between 1961-71.) There is a tendency to calculate the magnitude of the inflow of foreign nationals, the Hindu refugees of East Pakistan in particular, on the basis of the simple arithmetical differences between Assam's decennial population growth rates for 1951-61 and 1961-71 and those of India. But such calculations would be factually inconsistent. Between 1951-61, there was also an equally big hike in the rates of India's population increase, from 13.31 per cent to 21.64 per cent. The rate of growth in 1951-61 was 75.33 per cent higher than that in 1941-51 for Assam and 62.58 higher for India—the relative position remaining more or less unaltered. The fact is that with the launching of planning since 1951 both India and Assam have entered the second stage of demographic transition and hence the natural rates of population increase in both cases have jumped up.

It will be seen from what follows that the slightly higher rate of growth in the case of Assam is due to three factors: (i) tremendous increase in the natural rate of population growth of Assam which has been above the national average; (ii) influx of the Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, a very large number of whom have settled in Assam than in other states; and (iii) increased inflow of Indian nationals into Assam from the rest of the country since 1951.

Basic Causes

The causes for Assam's high rate of population increase are mainly three: (1) heavy immigration; (2) high natural rate of increase since 1921; and (3) the relative absence of mobility of the indigenous people of Assam. Specific causes and their relative importance, however, vary from sub-period to sub-period.

TABLE I
Trend of Population, India and Assam, 1901-80

Year	Number (lakhs)	Variation (lakhs)	Variation (per cent)	Number (lakhs)	Variation (lakhs)	Variation (per cent)	Excess over India (Column 7— Column 4)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1901	2383	—	—	32.90 (1.38)	—	—	—
1911	2520	137	5.73	38.49 (1.52)	5.59	16.99	11.26
1921	2512	-8	-0.30	46.37 (1.85)	7.88	20.47	20.77
1931	2789	277	11.00	55.61 (1.99)	9.24	19.92	8.92

1941	3185	396	14.23	66.94 (2.10)	11.33	20.37	6.14
1951	3610	425	13.31	80.29 (2.22)	13.35	19.94	6.63
1961	4391	781	21.64	108.37 (2.47)	28.08	34.97	13.33
1971	5479	1088	24.80	146.25 (2.67)	37.88	34.95	10.15
1981	6609	1130	20.60	191.00 (2.89)	44.75	30.60	10.00

Note: Figures in the parentheses in column 5 are percentages to India's population. Figures for 1981 are projected on the basis of 1971 data.

Sources: Decennial Censuses and other Official Publications.

TABLE 2
Percentage Increase in Population in India and 'Provinces'

	1901-51	1901-21	1921-51	1941-51
India	51.50	7.70	43.80	13.40
Assam	137.80	67.90	69.90	19.10
Bihar	41.70	3.70	38.00	10.10
Central Provinces	58.80	24.40	34.50	8.20
Bombay	69.50	7.70	61.80	23.20
Madras	55.50	15.10	40.40	14.40
Orissa	42.20	11.00	32.20	6.50
Punjab	20.70	-9.50	30.20	0.50
United Provinces	30.00	-5.50	35.50	11.80
Bengal	56.70	5.40	51.30	13.60

Source: Census of India, 1951, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I, A.

Between 1871-1901, the only positive factor was immigration, by far heaviest in the world, accompanied by the correspondingly low mobility of the original people of Assam. The main immigrants were ten garden labourers and the Bengali Muslim cultivators. The latter, Bengal Census Report for 1901 noted, were "hardy and prolific cultivators ...gradually working their way northwards. These people are accustomed to the risk arising from diluvion and devastating floods, which other cultivators are unwilling to face."¹ One important point to note about this period is that the natural rate of population growth was negative because the death rate was conspicuously high. "The decade 1891-1901 saw an overall increase of 6.68 lakhs, i.e., a mean decennial growth rate of 16.1 per cent. These are the lowest figures during the three preceding decades. This was largely due to terrible Kala-Azar in the central districts of Assam Valley during 1891-1901 which had wiped out a quarter of the entire population of Nowgong district. The earthquake of 1897 spelt a death wave."² Influenza and malaria epidemics were also frequent visitors. Further, some of the characteristics of the indigenous people — "absence of adventurism", "universality of early marriage", "lack of individualistic temperament", "ignorance of what is beyond the confines of his very limited horizon" and "in fact, the entire 'weltanschauung' or way of life... rather than any innate love of home," according to the Census 1951, were responsible for the general immobility of the people of Assam.³

During 1901-21, it is found that the natural growth rate became positive and this, with immigration, led to an acceleration of the overall rate of population increase. But the natural rate was lower than that of India throughout the period. The decade 1901-11 had started with a positive natural rate because Kala-Azar and earthquake of the preceding decade had resulted in a mid-heavy age-composition. "Both these factors caused heavy mortality at the extremities of life while the people in the prime of life increased." Immigration was also equally effective, with labourers of tea industry and a new stream of Nepalis joining the 'East Bengal colonists.' The trend of neck-to-neck increases due to

immigration and natural growth rate continued upto 1921. "Of the large increase of 8.3 lakhs during 1911-21, nearly half was due to immigration."

The next two decades, 1921-41, witnessed for the first time a positive natural growth rate higher than the Indian average. It by and large surpassed the rate of population increase due to immigration. During 1921-31, "the population growth, in spite of being highest recorded in Assam till then, was mainly due to natural increase, not immigration which formed only 10 per cent of the total."⁴ The decade 1931-41 witnessed yet another upswing constituting a 17.9 per cent mean decennial rate of increase, the highest so far. This was caused by higher natural growth rate of increase due to "growing mastery over epidemics, immigration of East Bengal colonists, tea garden labourers and the Nepalis,"⁵ the former being predominant.

The first half of the decade 1941-51 was dominated by the Second World War which came particularly close to Assam, especially after the fall of Burma. Thousands of Indians in Burma traversed the mountains on foot to reach their home country in 1942. For the first of Assam gave shelter to immigrants uprooted by political factors. This spell was accentuated by the Bengal famine of 1943 which led to Bengali immigration into the districts of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar.

If India had to pay the price for Independence in the shape of partition, Assam paid a surcharge in the form of a 'Referendum', which resulted in the major part of Sylhet district, the second most populous district of undivided India, going to East Pakistan. About this incident the 1951 Census observes: "Though Assam's loss in area as a result of this partition is negligible (it has lost only 1/8th of its existing area), it has lost very nearly 1/3rd of its entire population along with its vast paddy lands, and the tea, lime and cement industries of Sylhet. Far reaching effects of this loss will continue to be felt by Assam as well as India for many years to come."⁶ Loss of Sylhet led to a very heavy influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from the dumped part of the Sylhet

TABLE 3
Hindi, Bengali and Assamese Speaking Population of Assam, 1951-71

	1951 (laks)	1961 (laks)	1971 (laks)	Per cent Variation (1961 over 1951)	Per cent Variation (1971 over 1961)
Hindi	3.07	5.14	7.92	+ 67.43	+ 54.09
Bengali	13.25	20.09	28.82	+ 51.62	+ 43.45
Assamese	45.52	67.58	89.05	+ 48.46	+ 31.77

Source: As in Table 1.

TABLE 4
Immigration and Natural Rates of Growth in Assam, 1891-1981

Sub-Period	Only Cause	More Important Cause	Less Important Cause	Other	Remarks
1891-1901	Immigration (economic)				Natural rate negative because of very heavy death rate.
1901-21		Immigration (economic)	Natural rate		Natural rate positive but lower than that of India.
1921-41		Natural rate	Immigration (economic)		Natural rate overtook immigration.
1941-51				Equally Important	Second World War and partition created political cause of immigration.
1951-71				Ditto	Natural rate higher than national average. Inflow from other states goes up.
1971-81		Natural rate	Immigration (economic and political)		Observation depends on projection.

district in particular.⁷ "By the middle of 1949", the 1951 Census continues, "already 1,14,000 refugees were censused in Assam, and a majority of them, nearly 60,000, were censused in the district of Cachar alone. The communal disturbance in East Pakistan in February 1950 led to the arrival of far greater numbers, and were followed in Assam by an exodus of nearly one lakh of Muslims. The situation was soon brought under control and the large majority of these Muslims were back in their native places within a few months."⁸

There were also instances of voluntary repatriation of the Bengali Muslim from Assam to East Pakistan between 1947-51. The 1951 Census presents two Tables, 1.10-A and 1.10-B, showing the growth of population of Goalpara and Kamrup, which throw valuable light on the decrease of Muslim population in certain tracts of these two districts which were affected by communal disturbances of February-March 1950. Also, many Bengali Muslim employees of the Government of Assam opted to serve in Pakistan and left. From Shillong alone, 608 such employees with their families left for Pakistan.⁹

On the other hand, this period also experienced a moderate increase in the inflow of people to Assam from other states of the country. Prior to partition, such migration was not significant, the most important of such migrants being from areas constituting the present Rajasthan. The character of their migration was itself 'migratory', some members but not the same individuals, moving by rotation between Assam and the places of their origin. Their low female ratio to male (the 1951 Census disclosed that out of a total of 17,280 Marwari immigrants from Rajasthan only 5,528 were females)¹⁰ confirms this particular characteristic.

The period 1951-71 witnessed the highest ever rate of increase of population in Assam. This too happened due to further acceleration of the natural rate of growth, inflow of Bengali Hindu migrants from East Pakistan and further spurt in the inflow of Indian nationals from other states. It has

TABLE 5
Types of Immigration and the Characteristic of Immigrants, 1872-1972

Head	Tea Garden Labourers	Bengali Muslims	Nepalis
Period of Immigration	1872-1951	1891-August 1947	Since 1891
1	2	3	4

Cause
Reluctance of local people and also the Bengali Muslim immigrants to work in East Bengal and socio-religious characteristic of the Muslims

Excessive pressure of population on Indo-Nepalese relationship, religious oneness with the Hindus, habit of living at high altitudes

Economic sector where engaged
Tea industry (industrial sector)

Agricultural sector

Army, particularly Assam Rifles, watch and ward jobs darwans, dairying, woodcutting, etc.

Type of migration	Permanent	Permanent	Migratory and semi-permanent
Original mother tongue	Hindi, Mundari, Santhali, Oraon, Oriya, Thado, Tamil, Telugu, etc.	Bengali	Nepalese
Adoption of the Assamese language	Many since 1951 slowed down	Almost total adoption was complete by 1951	Mostly Hindi speaking. But some adopted
Religion	Hindu	Islam	Hindu
District where mostly settled	Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Cachar	Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Lakhimpur	All through the state, mostly in Hill areas
Approximate number in 1979	16 lakhs being 8.66 per cent of state's total population	Roughly 27.09 lakhs or 15 per cent of total state population (60 per cent of the Muslims of Assam)	2 lakhs or 1.4 per cent of total state population
Economic impact	Backbone of tea industry which alone contributed (in 1978-79) 19.7 per cent of state's domestic product	'Prolific cultivators' made Nowgong the granary of A'sam and raised jute production to 20 per cent of the country	Faithful and good soldiers

(Contd.)

(Contd.)

4

3

1	2	3	4
Place of origin (from where migrated)	W. Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Santhal Parganas, Madhya Pradesh & Andhra	East Bengal, mainly Mymensing, Rangpur, Pabna, Noakhali, Bogra, Tipera districts	Nepal
Remarks	Number of bonafide dependent workers stood at 6,00,855 on December 31, 1974. So no fresh inflow nowadays	Land hungry by nature: could fight Assam's topographical odds, ravage of flood, earthquake, Kalarazar, Malaria, etc. Some of them left for East Pakistan during 1950-51	Likely to serve the cause of guarding borders in the recently adopted scheme of Assam Rifle's 'face life'. Inflow slowed down

(Contd.)

(Contd.)

	Indian Nationals from Rest of India			
	(a) Hindu Refugees	Marwaris	(b) Biharis	(c) Others
1942-45	Since August 1947	Since 1931	Since 1951	Since 1951 (Oriyas came earlier)
5	6	7	8	9
Fall of Burma to the Japanese in 1942	Partition of India	Economic opportunities	Poor economic condition of Bihar and readiness to do hard work	Government and semi-government jobs, small trade the former being most important. Some Oriyas do cooking and priestly jobs
Government service, small business, contract works etc.	Govt. service, business, contract works, small industries, etc. Also some big entrepreneurs	Big industries, trade and commerce	All sorts of laborious work, brick building, saw milling etc.	No permanent economic interest

(Contd.)

(Contd.)

	5	6	7	8	9
Permanent	Permanent	Migratory	Migratory	Temporary	
Hindi, Bengali	Bengali	Rajasthani (Hindi)	Hindi	All languages included in the Eighth Schedule other than Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and Sanskrit	
Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	
Mostly Hindu	Hindu	Jain	Hindu	Mainly Hindu, some Christians	
All through the state, being more in Cachar, Kamrup and Dibrugarh	the Cachar, Nowgong, Goalpara mainly, some in districts	Kamrup, mostly in districts of Dibrugarh and Kamrup	All through the state, Mostly in the Brahmaputra valley	All through the state, but mainly in Kamrup, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar	
About 86 thousand or 0.47 per cent of state population	Difficult to ascertain. About 5 lakhs (1971) or 3.3 per cent of total population	See remark*	See remark*	About 2 lakhs or 1.4 per cent of total state population	

Increased pressure on service sector. Initially got some preference in recruitments

Increased pressure on service sector

Major industries, trade and commerce

Help trade and commerce, conveyance system, construction work, etc.

Serving the cause of economic development of the nation

India

Particularly Pakistan

East Rajasthan

Bihar

All over India

Assimilated with similar linguistic groups residing in Assam

Mostly floating population. People from Orissa, numbering 1.5 lakhs in 1971 form the largest group in this category

a Both constituted 7.92 lakhs or 6.26 per cent of state's population in 1971.

*Projected number in 1979 is 11.40 lakhs.

TABLE 6
Distribution of Population of Assam according to Languages, 1911-51

Language	Number of Speakers (lakhs)		No. per 10,000 of Total Population	
	1911	1951	1911	1951
Hindi	2.35	4.24	610	763
Bengali	17.58	14.90	4,568	2,679
Assamese	8.35	17.47	2,170	3,142
Abor	0.33	0.12	85	22
Miri	—	0.71	—	127
Bodo (group)	1.43	4.64	370	835
Mikir	0.56	1.11	146	199
				149

Naga (group)	1.20	1.65	1.92	311	296	239
Kuki chin (group)	0.11	1.78	1.92	28	320	239
Khasi	1.10	2.03	2.68	284	365	334
Manipuri	1.61	0.78	0.82	418	140	102
Others	3.87	6.18	5.18	1,010	1,112	648
Total	38.49	55.61	80.29			

Notes: Abor for 1911 include Miri (Abor-Miri). Other languages were Garo, Mundari, Lushai or Dullian (presently Mizo), Santhali or Har, Nepali, Rabha, Thado or Jhangesen, Kurukh or Oraon, Dimasa, Paithe and Lalung.

Figures for Manipuri included in the general census for Eastern India in 1911, were shown separately in 1931 Census. This explains the decline in the number of Manipuri speakers between 1911 and 1931.

Source: As that of Table 1.

TABLE 7
Linguistic Transformation of Assam, 1911-71

Sub-period	Language	1911		1931		Variation in Percentage of Total	Variation in Number of Speakers (Per cent)
		Speakers (lakhs)	Percentage of Total	Speakers (lakhs)	Percentage of Total		
1911-31	Hindi	2.35	6.11	4.24	7.62	+ 1.51	+ 80.43
	Bengali	17.58	45.67	14.90	26.79	- 18.88	- 15.24
	Assamese	8.35	21.69	17.47	31.42	+ 9.73	+ 109.22
	Others	10.21	26.53	19.00	34.17	+ 7.64	+ 86.09
	Total	38.49		55.61			+ 44.48
1931-51		1931		1951			
	Hindi	4.24	7.62	3.07	3.82	- 3.80	- 27.59
	Bengali	14.90	26.79	13.25	16.50	- 10.29	- 11.07
	Assamese	17.47	31.42	45.52	56.69	25.27	+ 160.56

Others	19.00	34.17	18.45	22.99	-11.18	- 2.89
Total	55.61	80.29	80.29			+ 44.38
		1951		1971		
1951-71						
Hindi	3.07	3.82	7.92	5.42	1.60	+ 157.98
Bengali	13.25	16.50	28.82	19.71	+ 3.21	+ 117.51
Assamese	45.52	56.69	89.05	60.89	+ 4.20	+ 95.63
Others	18.45	22.99	20.46	13.98	- 9.01	+ 10.89
Total	80.29	146.25	146.25			+ 82.15
		1961		1971		
1961-71						
Hindi	5.14	4.74	7.92	5.42	+ 0.68	+ 54.09
Bengali	20.09	18.54	28.82	19.71	+ 1.17	+ 43.45
Assamese	67.58	62.36	89.05	60.89	- 1.47	+ 31.77
Others	15.56	14.36	20.46	13.98	- 0.38	+ 31.49
Total	108.37	146.25	146.25			+ 34.95

Source: As that of Table 1.

been mentioned earlier that as a result of entering into the second stage of demographic transition, the natural rates of increase of population of both India and Assam have gone up. But lagging behind in its performance of family planning compared to the mean national performance and that of other states, Assam's natural rate has exceeded that of the nation.

During the decade 1961-71, the rate of increase of Assamese speaking population was 31.77 per cent, the natural rate of increase. It is sometimes maintained that high increase of the Assamese speaking population does not generally represent an actual increase in the number of original Assamese speaking people, and that the increase is due to adoption by people speaking other languages of the Assamese language. It will be shown below that such adoption mainly took place between 1911-51 and less significantly during the decade 1951-61. But since 1961 there has been no such adoption. So the increase in the number of Assamese speaking people during 1961-71 is the natural increase in the number of Assamese people as it stood in 1961. This rate which is very close to the overall rate of population increase of the state and 6.97 per cent higher than that of the national rate of increase is above that of the country. The corresponding rate of the Bengali speaking population is 43.45 per cent, the excess being due to influx of the Hindu refugees from East Pakistan. During this decade, in 1965, there was a big influx into Assam after a communal flare-up in East Pakistan. Similarly, the rate of increase of Hindi speaking population is 54.09 per cent, the highest rate of inflow of Indian nationals from Hindi speaking states (Table 3).

The continuous increase of Hindi speaking population during the period 1951-71 is due to heavier inflow of people from Rajasthan and a new stream from Bihar. By this period, the former's control over the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy of Assam had been well established. "A peculiar feature of the economy is that a sizeable section of the population earning its livelihood in Assam is of a migratory nature. A substantial part of earnings of such seasonal migrants which are saved are not available for being ploughed

TABLE 8
Variation of Assam's Population and Population of Hindi, Bengali
and Assamese Speaking People, 1911-71

Sub-period	Variation of State's Population (per cent)		Variation (per cent) in Speakers of		Difference between per cent Variation of State's Population and of Speakers of		
	Hindi	Bengali	Hindi	Assamese	Hindi	Assamese	
1911-31	44.48 (2.22)	-15.24 (-0.76)	80.43 (4.02)	109.22 (5.46)	35.95 (1.80)	-59.72 (-2.99)	64.74 (3.24)
1931-51	44.38 (2.22)	-27.59 (-1.38)	-27.59 (-1.38)	160.56 (8.03)	-71.97 (-3.00)	-55.45 (-2.77)	116.18 (5.81)
1951-71	82.15 (4.11)	157.98 (7.90)	117.51 (5.86)	95.63 (4.78)	75.83 (3.79)	35.36 (1.77)	13.48 (0.67)
1961-71	34.95 (3.50)	54.09 (5.41)	43.45 (4.35)	31.77 (3.18)	19.14 (1.91)	8.50 (0.85)	-3.18 (-0.32)

Note: Figures in the parentheses are average annual variation. Calculations are made on the basis of data of Table 7.

TABLE 9
Distribution of Assam's Population by Religion, 1911-71

Sub-period	Religion	1911		1931		Variation in Percentage of Total between 1911 and 1931	Variation in Population between 1911 and 1931 (per cent)
		People (lakhs)	Percentage of Total	People (lakhs)	Percentage of Total		
1911-31	Hindu	20.85	54.17	31.80	57.18	+ 3.01	+ 52.52
	Muslim	10.82	28.11	17.77	31.95	+ 3.84	+ 64.23
	Christian	0.38	0.99	1.31	2.36	+ 1.37	+ 244.74
	Others	6.44	16.73	4.73	8.51	- 8.22	- 26.55
	Total	33.49		55.61			+ 44.48
1931-51	Hindu	31.80	57.18	52.35	65.20	+ 8.02	+ 64.62
	Muslim	17.77	31.95	17.74	22.09	- 9.86	+ 0.17
	Christian	1.31	2.36	5.22	6.50	+ 4.14	+ 298.47
	Others	4.73	8.51	4.98	6.21	- 2.30	+ 5.29
	Total	55.61		80.29			+ 44.38

back into the economy and are remitted outside the state. Similarly, the corporate sector and trade are in the hands of persons exerting control from outside and who are remitting profits outside Assam. Such remittances are not benefiting the economy of Assam either by way of additional investment or by other spread effects.... An important reason for poor state of industrialisation of the state is that the corporate sector is mainly in the hands of immigrants who tend to take the profits out of the state."¹¹ In the Brahmaputra Valley laborious and toilsome jobs like portering, rickshaw pulling, brick making, construction labour, etc., have been monopolised by the 'Biharis' who now command some collective bargaining power. Another constituent of this flow from the rest of India is employees of government and semi-government organisations, including service personnel. Their number stood at 1,85,018 (1.26 per cent of the state's population) in 1971. Since many of the migratory Indians particularly those having specific economic interests, go back to their states of origin and return themselves as people of their own states in the census, it is likely that the population of Assam in between censuses is higher than what has been returned in the census.

The number of Nepalis in Assam, yet another section of immigrants now being dubbed as 'infiltrators' and 'foreign nationals', stood at around 2 lakhs in 1971 against 1.8 lakhs in 1961.

The above analysis reveals two general facts about the demography of Assam between 1901-81. These are, first, that the importance of immigration and the natural rate as causes of population increase has varied between sub-periods; second, that the exact classes of immigrants and their intensity have also changed, keeping, however, the flow of immigration into Assam continuous. Tables 4 and 5 summarise some of these general facts. Table 6, presenting the linguistic distribution of the population of Assam in the period 1911-51, shows that the state, in the words of Mullan, the Census Superintendent in 1931, is a 'veritable Babel'. Out of this veritable Babel the Assamese language has now emerged as the most prominent,

and that too by surpassing the proportion that any single language in Assam had ever attained.

The transformation started between 1911-31. The unique feature of this sub-period is that Bengal which was at the top in 1911 (Bengali speakers constituted more than double the number of Assamese speakers both in absolute numbers and in percentage) declined in both respects by 1931 yielding place to the Assamese. An important point to note here is that the decline was only in case of the Bengali, while the other languages grew at their natural rate. This apparently paradoxical development took place because almost the entire population of the 'Bengali Muslim immigrants adopted Assamese as their 'mother tongue'.

The same linguistic transformation continued during 1931-51. A new feature was that while the number of Assamese continued to swell at the cost of all other languages, the position of other tribal languages too declined. The number of Abor speakers, for instance, declined from 12,000 to 2,000 and that of the Miri speakers, from 71,000 to 53,000. The 1951 Census has this to say on the entire situation.

A comparison with the percentage of population speaking different languages in 1931 reveals an interesting tale. There is a striking increase in the percentage of the people who speak Assamese in 1951 (56.7 per cent) over those of 1931, which was only 31.4 per cent; there is an equally striking decrease in the percentage of people speaking Bengali in 1951 which is only 16.5 per cent against 26.8 per cent in 1931. With the solitary exception of Assamese, every single language or language group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of people speaking the same. All this decline has gone to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951. The figures do not fail to reflect the aggressive nationalism now prevailing in Assam coupled with the desire of many persons among the Muslims as well as tea garden labour immigrants to adopt Assamese as their mother tongue in the state of their adoption.... The phenomenon is also coupled with the genuine increase in the number of people speaking Assamese

with the introduction of more schools in the tea garden areas in the Brahmaputra Valley where the medium of instructions is naturally Assamese.¹²

By including other unspecified languages, the Assamese got some bonus as well. At least one such instance is mentioned in the 1951 Census Report. Some people of Goalpara district insisted on recording their mother tongue as 'Goalparia'. "As a result, 4,088 persons (2,562 males and 1,526 females) returned their mother tongue as Goalparia. There being no such language in existence, these persons were included under Assamese as directed by the Registrar General, after consulting the state government."¹³

Tables 7 and 8 show (i) the linguistic transformation of Assam and (ii) the link relative rates of increase of population of Assam and those of Hindi, Bengali and Assamese speaking population for 1911-71, with the controversial period 1951-71 divided into separate decades.

Some generalisations can be made on the basis of the facts which emerge from Tables 6-8. First, the big hike in the number and percentage of people speaking the Assamese between 1911-31 and the corresponding downswing of the Bengali speaking population confirm the fact that during this period, the Assamese language swelled at the expense of the Bengali language alone. The second and by far the biggest hike took place between 1931-51 when all the languages of 'the veritable Babel' grew slim to help the Assamese to swell.¹⁴ Decline in the absolute number and ratio of the Hindi speakers is another noticeable feature. Secondly, the positive variation of all the three major languages during 1951-71 shows that there was no cognisable adoption of people belonging to other languages into the Assamese. The highest growth rate of Hindi, followed, in order, by Bengali and Assamese, reaffirms the important finding above that the rate of the Hindi speaking people was highest during this period, followed by the Bengali (refugee influx) and the Assamese (natural rate of increase). Thirdly, the mean annual 0.67 per cent higher rate of growth of the Assamese than the overall increase of the state

population during 1951-71, however, indicates that there was little adoption from 'the other languages' group. This is also corroborated by a small decline in the percentage (but not the number) of speakers belonging to the latter. Decadal decomposition of data for 1951-71 shows that this little adoption had taken place during the decade 1951-61 only. During the latter decade, that is, 1961-71, the Assamese speakers declined by —3.18 per cent which indicates that there was no adoption. The reason for the decline is that the relative increases of Hindi and Bengali were higher, that of the former being the highest. This fact confirms yet another finding—that the 31.77 per cent decennial rate of increase of the Assamese speaking population during 1961-71 represents their natural rate of increase. Lastly, if immigration, being equally responsible with positive natural growth rate, has caused Assam's population to grow at the highest rate in India between 1901-51, it also demonstrates an equally unique example of the magnitude an original language of a region can grow by adopting most of those immigrants into it.

'Assamisation' of Bengali Muslim Immigrants

The circumstances under which almost the entire population of Bengali Muslim immigrants adopted Assamese form an interesting story. There was an advanced Calcutta oriented Hindu upper middle class among the indigenous Assamese which, though not large in number, dominated Assamese society. This class developed a strong instinct of consciousness about its linguistic and ethnic identity. Finding that they constituted only around 21.00 per cent of the total population of the province (1911) against the Bengali who were above 45.00 per cent, they became instinctively concerned about their identity. This apprehension was further fuelled by the continuous inflow of immigrants from East Bengal. The immigrants, being Muslims, also created some extra linguistic apprehensions, since in those days the Muslim League was out to give a communal shape to Indian politics.

But politically, the nationalist leadership in Assam could not resist this inflow of the Muslim immigrants who had the

direct patronage of the Muslim League widely cultured by the original Assamese Muslims who were a small but powerful class of landed aristocracy of Assam. The educated among them were mostly Aligarh-oriented. Having vast land holdings under their control, they could feed the land hungry East Bengali Muslim immigrants. One added attraction of the latter to come to Assam was the ryotwari land tenure system in Assam which offered them the taste of a refreshing life of peasant proprietorship in sharp contrast to the permanent settlement system of East Bengal under which they were either share croppers or virtual bonded labourers. These immigrants served the individual feudal interest of the Assamese Muslim landed aristocracy, in addition to serving the broad cause of 'Islamisation'. A system of land wage contract between them had made almost the entire Bengali Muslim immigrants peasant proprietors by 1951. It was at the initiative of the Sadullah Ministry that most of the immigrant Bengali Muslims became 'Assamised' by adopting the Assamese as their 'mother tongue'. The 'Assamisation' drive was welcomed by the Muslim immigrants, because, in those days, if Indian Muslims were generally communal, the Bengali Muslims were even more so. To them, therefore, 'Islamisation' was a mission for the sake of which they could readily sacrifice their linguistic identity. In the process they also secured economic benefits.

To the nationalist Assamese leadership, initially, it was the best of a bad bargain. But they accepted the process, reluctantly though, for the sake of not exposing their linguistic and ethnic identity to be swamped 'by the swarms'. But later, when the Congress ministry came to power under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi, they also followed the path of 'aggressive' nationalism. The process was virtually complete by August 1947; the dumping of the major part of Sylhet district gave the finishing touch.

Muslim 'Infiltration'

There is a general and widely held apprehension, both in Assam and in the rest of the country, about 'Muslim

infiltration' in the state. "The frustration is further fuelled by fears that in the not too distant future they may be swamped by 'foreign nationals', mostly Muslim from Bangladesh."¹⁵ It is presumed that such Muslim 'infiltrators' into Assam got assimilated with the Assamese speaking population following the practice of their predecessors.

If this presumption is correct, two things must follow. First, being an addition to the bonafide Muslim nationals living in Assam, and given their natural rate of increase which is generally higher than that of the Hindus, there should have been a steep rise in the Muslim population of Assam, at least at a higher than that of the Muslim population in the rest of the country. Secondly, since these are supposed to have adopted Assamese, there should have been an equally steep hike in the Assamese speaking population. It has been found above that between 1951-71, there was no hike in the Assamese speaking population and the rate of increase was quite normal in the decade 1961-71. This part of the presumption is thus not tenable.

Table 9 presents the distribution of Assam's population by religion, all other conditions remaining same as those of Table 7. The Table shows that between 1951-71, Muslim population of Assam varied almost at par with its Hindu counterpart. There was no hike. This is further confirmed by the fact that during the decade 1961-71, the Muslim population declined by -0.74 per cent of the total population of the state, the link relative rate of variation also being lower than that for the Hindus and the Christians. This, along with the slow natural rate of increase of the Assamese speaking population, shows that the apprehension of 'infiltration' of 'Bengali Muslims' between 1951-71 is not statistically valid.¹⁶ An interesting corroborating factor that emerges out of Table 9 is that other than between 1911-31, the increase of the Muslim population was never higher than that of its Hindu counterpart. This tallies with the huge immigration of Bengali Muslim cultivators that took place between 1911-31.

When the distribution of population by religion of Assam for the decade 1961-71 is compared with that of India, it is found that (i) the Hindu population of India as percentage of total population declined during this period by 0.78 per cent while that of Assam increased by 1.18 per cent; (ii) the Muslim population of India went up by 0.50 per cent while that of Assam declined by -0.74 per cent; (iii) the Christian population of Assam increased at a faster rate than that of India and (iv) rate of increase was lowest for the Muslims of Assam compared to the Hindus and the Christians. All these are evident from Table 10.

These lower figures for the Muslim population of Assam in all respects compared to those for the Indian Muslims also confirm that apprehensions about 'infiltration' of 'Bangladeshi Muslims' are not factually tenable. This also reveals that since the people opting for adoption, namely, the Bengali Muslims, have become scarce, the Assamese language has failed to swell since 1951.

Some Conclusions

From the above certain important points can be summarised. First, it is found that since 1951 Assam's rate of population increase has been always much higher than that of the country as a whole or an state or province thereof. Secondly, unlike in other states, immigration and natural growth rate are equally prominent causes contributing to Assam's heavy increase of population. Thirdly, the tremendous increase of Assam's population since 1951 is due to (i) an acceleration of the natural rate of increase, (ii) influx of the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan and (iii) heavier inflow of Indian nationals from the rest of the country. It appears from these three points that the widely held impression that Assam's population has been mounting only due to influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from 'East Pakistan' since partition is not tenable. Fourthly, the tremendous swelling of the Assamese speaking population by people belonging to other languages adopting the Assamese language is a unique instance of its kind in the history of any

regional language of India. Fifthly, the apprehension about 'infiltration' of 'Bangladeshi' or 'East Pakistan' Muslims into Assam appears not to be supported by facts. Sixthly, the inflow of immigrants from the Eastern Bengal part of the sub-continent into Assam has been continuous since 1891. The only difference is that while it was the Bengali Muslims who migrated between 1891 and 1947, the vacuum has been filled by the Bengali Hindus since 1947. Finally, the burden of Hindu refugees on Assam has been greater than on any other state.

[This article examines how immigration has affected the population pattern of Assam. The period of study is 1891-1981, but the emphasis is on the changes in the demographic pattern of Assam since 1947. Its chief findings are:

1. Since 1951, the rate of increase of Assam's population has been much higher than that of the country as a whole or of any state or 'province'. But unlike in other states, this heavy increase has been due to (a) an acceleration of the natural rate of increase; (b) influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan; and (c) heavier migration of Indians from the rest of the country.

2. The tremendous swelling in the number of the Assamese speaking population during 1911-31 as a consequence of people belonging to other language groups adopting Assamese language is a unique instance of its kind.

3. Apprehensions about the infiltration of 'Bangladeshi' or East Pakistani Muslims into Assam appear not to be supported by facts. The fact is that while it was mainly the Bengali Muslims, motivated by economic as well as political factors, who migrated to Assam between 1891 and 1947, such migration as has taken place since 1947, almost entirely due to political reasons, has been of Bengali Hindus.

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NOTES

1. Census 1911, General Report, Eastern India, p. 60.
2. Census of India, 1951, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I-A, General Report, p. 31.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3. Incidentally R. B. Vaghaiwalla, the Census Commissioner in Assam for the 1951 Census was the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet district at the time of Referendum.
7. There were many legal, historical and practical reasons for the Hindu Bengalis of Sylhet to turn to Assam. First, Sylhet was an integral part of Assam when the Province of Assam was created. Second, thanks to the Radcliffe Bengal Boundary Commission award, a part of the district comprising four thanas as Karimganj sub-division was awarded to India. Third, many Hindu employees of the Government of Assam opted to serve in India and came over to Assam, thus offering a base to many of their relatives and friends. Fourth, many Hindus of Sylhet had already been staying in different parts of the then Assam. Last but not the least, her twin sister, Cachar district was still in Assam. For all these reasons the Hindus of Sylhet district migrated in large numbers to Assam, particularly to Cachar district.
8. Census 1951, *op. cit.*, p. 33. It is relevant to note that almost all of these 60,000 Hindu refugees censused in Cachar district were from Sylhet.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 411-12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
11. "A Survey of the Tax System in Assam", National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 146-7.
12. Census 1951, *op. cit.*, pp. 413-14, para 5. The note accompanying Appendix 9 of the Report is also interesting.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 414.
14. The aggressive linguistic nationalism implicit in these figures worked as one of the reasons for the step by step separation of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram from Assam. In Nagaland, for instance, the voluntary acceptance of the Assamese had been widespread.
15. M.V. Kamath, 'Neglected Assam', *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, January 20-26, 1980, p. 8.

16. An undesirable practice often resorted to by contractors, a Second World War hierarchy in Assam and still a wealthy and influential force, may be mentioned. It is possible that many of them adopt some unauthorised 'arrangement' with the border vigilance forces to import some highly productive labour, particularly for earth cutting, from Bangladesh. The spell of monsoon in Assam being longest and heaviest, outdoor works like constructions of roads, railway track, various PWD works need be done between November and March; 'crash programmes', that is, works to be done hurriedly, are frequent. This leads to a tremendous upswing in the seasonal demand for labour. An on the spot study indicates that through the same 'arrangement', these seasonal 'infiltrators' are sent back to Bangladesh by number as per a list maintained by the parties involved. If, for instance, a surprise survey and check of manual workers engaged by contractors in big earth cutting works, say in the extension of the broad gauge railway track from New Bongaigaon to Gauhati and the National Highway from Shillong to Agartala, a road that runs along Indo-Bangladesh border, were to be conducted, many such seasonal 'infiltrators' could be found.

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