

# IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON ASSAMESE POLITICS

ABSTRACT

By

**ALAKA SARMAH**

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The recent 'Assam Agitation' on the foreigners issue launched by AASU and the AAGSP created such a turmoil that attention of the Social Scientists and Journalists all over the world had been drawn to various aspects of Assamese social and political life. This interest resulted in publication of a series of books on Assam. But surprisingly none of these works had dealt systematically with the issue of immigration and its impact on Assamese political life. Some authors have tried to bring out the political implication of the movement. Articles on the demographic aspect of the problems too have appeared but the impact of immigration as such on Assam politic have been almost totally neglected by scholars. Even those authors who try to examine the question of immigration in the context of national question do not examine the way in which it influences the policies, pronouncements and actions of various political parties and groups in Assam in a systematic manner.

The movement on foreign nationals issue has been studied by various scholars from an array of varying perspective. Amalendu Guha in his article, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist'<sup>1</sup> pointed out that the fear of the Assamese about losing their identity as a result of large

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1. Amalendu Guha, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist', Economic and Political Weekly, special number, 1980, pp. 1699-1720.

scale immigration is most unreal. He pointed out that there is a decline in the Bengali speaking population in Assam. But as it is pointed out by other scholars, he has failed to see that this is due to the separation of the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet.<sup>2</sup> The growth rate of Bengali speaking population in recent time is much higher than the Assamese speaking population. But the figures we have do not show the actual growth rate of the Bengali speaking population. Because many Bengali speakers may have recorded Assamese as their mother tongue due to political considerations, when in 1951 there was a **rise** in the Assamese speaking population, Guha himself pointed out that this was because many Bengali speakers who had earlier recorded themselves as Bengali, for **political reasons** declared **themselves** to be Assamese.<sup>3</sup> So there is every chance that the immigrants would also resort to such policies even in 1970, or still later. Therefore the fear of the Assamese that they will be reduced to minority and there is a threat to their identity may not be unreal.

Some scholars point out that economic backwardness was the main cause behind the problem. They draw attention to the

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2. See for instance, Apurba Baruah's 'Indian Nationalism and the Assamese national question,' North East Quartely, Vol. I, August 1982, p. 28.

3. Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj (New Delhi, 1977), p. 25.

almost colonial exploitation of Assam,<sup>4</sup> dominance of outsiders in the job, market, trade and business. While some argue that jobs go to outsiders due to lack of local skill and enterprise. Others cite instances how the local entrepreneurs are frustrated. They have also shown that even unskilled jobs are also cornered by outsiders. The trend began in the British Period and continues even today. Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that there have no serious efforts at industrialization of Assam.

While Assam produces the major share of the country's crude oil, yet the people of Assam had to launch two agitations to get two small refineries established in the State. Whatever small industries are there in the State, the lion's share is always controlled by outsiders. Such backwardness together with the problem of large scale migration created conditions for a mass movement in Assam.

But the problem of immigration in Assam is not a new one. The problem was quite serious during the time of Saadullah. 'During 1939-41, Saadullah Government allotted one lakh bighas of land in the Assam Valley for the settlements of East Bengal immigrants.'<sup>5</sup> Saadullah seemed to have maintained that immigrants were mostly landless and the only

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4. Tilottama Misra, 'Assam - A Colonial Hinterland', Economic and Political Weekly, August 9, 1980, pp.1357-64.

5. H.K. Barpujari, S.K. Barpujari, A.C. Bhuyan, Political History of Assam, Vol. III (Government of Assam, Gauhati, 1980).

solution was to provide them with available lands'. Seeing the gravity of the problem, the Congress Government introduced the 'line system' in Assam in 1920. This system was disliked by the immigrants, both hindus and muslims. Because it compelled them to live and toil in particular segregated localities. When Saadullah again came back to power he even opened the grazing forest reserves which were earlier held to be inviolable. But when circumstances compelled Saadullah to enunciate an official policy on the immigrant issue, he devised a scheme known as 'Land development scheme'. According to this scheme a ban was imposed on the settlements of post 1938 immigrants in waste lands. But in practice, this system was not implemented and the immigrants persisted with their unauthorised encroachment of the Assam Valley. An analysis of the actions of the political parties during the period and the responses of both the immigrants and the indigenous population shows that this issue had greatly influenced the politics of Assam. The fortunes of political parties were determined to a considerable extent by their approach to this issue. A section of the Assamese under the leadership of Ambikagiri Roychoudhury even told Nehru that they will support Congress if immigration was stopped and Assamese majority in Assam was guaranteed.

The problem of immigration and the possible threat to Assamese identity persisted even after independence .

There were attempts to regulate immigration through the introduction of Passport-cum-visa-System in 1952, but as the provisions of foreigners Act 1946 and the rules made there under were not applicable to the citizens of Pakistan and they were not required to get registered. Such attempts could not control immigration from the then East Pakistan. Again in 1950, immigrants (expulsion from Assam) Act was passed empowering the Central Government to detect and deport infiltrants from East Bengal which was then East Pakistan. But it was not taken seriously and was not implemented. The extent to which the issue of immigration influenced Assam politics could be gauged from the number of memoranda, The APCC submitted on the issue and how Congress policy changed from one of resisting immigrations during the freedom movement to one of patronizing it and converting the immigrants into a vote bank.

The Bangladesh war of liberation of 1971 brought about a deluge in the Pakistani infiltration into the State. During the Partition of the country, a large number of Hindus, also infiltrated into Assam. Thus in the Post independence period, these two events helped a large number of immigrants to come into Assam. As a result pressure on land in Assam is skyrocketed and the Assamese middle classes and under their hegemony, the other sections of the Assamese society view immigrants as a serious threat.

The AASU and AAGSP started their agitation demanding detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners in the early period of 1979. The agitation as claimed by the agitators was a mass movement directed towards the preservation of the social, cultural and political identity of Assam within the State of India. The identity crisis in Assam appears to be a complex problem involving social, cultural and economic dimensions which need to be attended. But before one can take up such of these issues one has to examine the question whether this crisis of identity is real or not. One must however realise that even if such a crisis is not real, the very existence of such a feeling might create a serious problems for the body politic.

There were many who termed this agitation as one directed against the non-Assamese. But whatever they said, they failed to give any evidence. The AASU and AAGSP repeatedly pointed out that the movement was not directed against all outsiders residing in Assam. The movement according to them was neither racial nor communal. It was only directed against all foreigners residing illegally in Assam. The movement was confined not only to the cities and towns but also to villages. There were lakhs of people in demonstration, this could not have been possible without active participation of the peasantry. The resistance ~~in~~ 1983 election received in rural Assam also proved that peasantry did

participate in a big way. The reasons for peasants participation is the hope of alleviating their problems about pressure on land and the hegemonic position of the Assamese middle class. The Assamese middle class were successful in touching a very sensitive string in the psyche of the Assamese people, that is, the fear of losing identity.

Regarding the positions of the leftist parties mainly CPI(M), CPI and the CPI(M-L) groups, it must be stated that CPI(M) right from the beginning of the movement argued that the movement was directed against the religious, ethnic and the linguistic minorities. This position was close to the one taken by the Congress. AASU and AAGSP, on the other hand, criticised the ruling and the leftist parties for creating obstacles for their narrow political interest. They pointed out that the solution was elusive only because of the government's unwillingness to recognise the Hindus who had infiltrated into Assam in the 1961-71 as foreigners.<sup>6</sup> This disproves CPI(M) allegation that the movement was against minorities.

The CPI(M) tried to explain the movement in terms of a design of the ruling party to hinder the progress of the leftist party in Assam. In 1971, the CPI(M) did not secure any seat but in 1978 they secured 11 seats. According to

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6. 'Ruling and leftist parties creating obstacles', Assam Tribune, 23 October, 1982.

them, the ruling classes were shaken at their success. This approach however refuses to take note of the anti-Congress trend in the post emergency period. A closer analysis shows that as a result of CPI(M)'s unreasonable position in the early phase of the movement it turned against them. However anti-Communist and Chauvinistic forces in Assam did take advantage of the situation to launch an attack on the CPI(M) and other left parties. The position taken by the CPI(M) in the issue of immigration of foreign nationals and in the movement launched by the AASU and AAGSP over this issue appears to be unjustifiable. This unjustifiable stand coupled with the irresponsible statements issued by the CPI(M) leadership in West Bengal<sup>7</sup> invited the wrath of the Assamese masses. The situation worsened mainly because the CPI(M) tried to organize resistance to the movement in minority pockets and tried to incite sections of tribals in Assam.

The CPI on the other hand, stated that the leadership of the AASU and AAGSP raised the false cry among the people that the identity of the Assamese nationality was in danger and that they were being swamped by the non-Assamese. The foreign nationals issue was sought to be dismissed as an Assamese versus non-Assamese issue and the threat to the identity of the Assamese people posed by unchecked immigra-

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7. The West Bengal Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu himself remarked in an published daily that the participation of Assamese women and children in the anti-foreigners agitation is nothing but a well organized picnic.

tion from across the border was claimed to be non-existent one fanned by Assamese chauvinists. But if we analyse the views of CPI it is noticeable that there is a gradual change. Pramode Gogoi, General Secretary of the CPI, himself admitted that the problem of immigration in Assam was in a grave situation and unless adequate steps were taken by the Government, the unity and integrity of the country will be jeopardized.

Other left parties like the SUCI, RSP are not particularly influential in Assam and they have called for detection on the basis of 1971 as the cut off year. The CPI(M-L) fractions are sharply divided in their assessment of the Assam problem - with the Bhaskar Nandy group being totally opposed to the movement and the Vinod Misra fraction expressing its qualified support to it. These are the two major CPI(M-L) groups functioning in the state and organisationally both are pretty weak. The CPI(M-L) has generally taken the stand that the Assamese crisis has its roots in the nationality question that has occupied the central place in all the disturbances in Assam. This analysis seems to have struck a sympathetic chord in the minds of the Assamese.

Though during the agitation, the wrath of the people was against the Congress but it must be admitted that in the pre-independence period the Congress party was not

against raising the issue of immigration. Veteran Congress leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi etc. realised the danger which lay in immigration. They placed petitions before parliament regarding the danger of immigration. But soon after 1947, when the Congress leaders of Assam, instead of devoting attention to the immediate developmental programmes of the State, began to accept whatever policies the Centre dictated regarding Assam, the Assamese middle class got alienated from Congress. The result was that the Congress had to depend on minorities for their votes. This trend compelled Congress to adopt a new electoral policy in which they tried to form and mobilise small linguistic and cultural groups distinct from the Assamese. Their dependence on the 'Alis' and 'Coolies' the OBC and the MOBC etc. is a manifestation of this approach.

The demographic situation in post independence Assam has been such that by mobilising the minorities, the Congress could manage a near total hegemony in the politics of Assam. The Janata Party did form a ministry in Assam in 1978 with a meagre 27 percent of the total electorates at a time, when in other states Janata Party acquired an absolute majority. In their election manifesto, the Janata Party gave importance to the economic development of Assam but they did not talk of changing the basic politics of production and distribution and of lessening the economic inequalities. Janata Party in

Assam like the Congress, represented the interests of the All India Janata Party, that is why majority of Assam electorates had not taken any interest in the political alternative. The Janata Party in Assam was not really an alternative to the Congress, that is why they failed to evoke any mass support from the voters. It is however, interesting to note that the movement on the foreigners issue started during the Janata regime and had it not been for a soft stand taken by the party in the initial stage of the movement it would have been far more difficult for the leaders of the movement to give it the shape it took. The Janata Party seemed to have been torn between the pulls of its 'national' interest and the realisation of the cause of the movement. It did not actively participate in the movement but kept trying for a solution. Ravindra Verma of the Janata Party did offer a solution, but his solution was not acceptable to the leaders of the movement because according to them acceptance of Verma's formula would disperse only a few thousands of immigrants while the majority of them would stay on in Assam.

Bharatiya Janata Party has been most vocal and articulate on the Assam crisis. Because of BJPs close association with the Rastriya Sayong Sevek Sangh and because of its known pro-Hindu stance, its support to the Assam agitation has been viewed in terms of its alleged anti-Muslim politics.

It has very often been suggested by the Congress (I) that only because a large majority of the immigrants are Muslims, BJP wants them deported. But an analysis of the BJP position vis-a-vis the movement shows that it did try to adopt a rational line. Atal Bihari Vajpayee of BJP did suggest a formula for solving the Assam tangle, which is quite similar to that of the AASU's.

Regional political parties played an important role in the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam. But prior to the formation of Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), these parties were quite weak in Assam. The Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) which was the first to realise the danger of immigration in Assam in the 70s decided to launch the anti-foreigners agitation in Assam later they merged with AAGSP. The PLP declared that immigrants have succeeded in establishing some pockets in Assam and thus influenced the political prospects of some major political parties. The PLP is the first party which declared in 1978 that for the detection of foreigners there should be a special branch and the detected foreigners should be deported and their names should be deleted from the electoral rolls of Assam. They also pointed out that municipalities and Panchayats should be duly empowered for the detection of foreigners, PLP demanded the deportation of not only the foreign immigrants but also the migrants from various states of Assam. Because of this, they were criticised as

chauvinistic, whereas AASU and AAGSP demanded the deportation of only the foreign immigrants. The PLP did use the issue of immigration to mobilise a large section of Assamese masses behind it.

The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) did realise that there was a threat to the existence of the tribals in Assam. Without the participation of these tribal people in the foreigners agitation, the agitation itself would not have reached such a massive scale. The problem of immigration badly hit the tribal population in Assam. All the 37 blocks and belts reserved for the tribal people are on the verge of extinction. There was tremendous pressure on land including tribal belts. This is due to unchecked immigration of landless people from across the border. They realised that the identity of the tribal people was in danger. The history of Tripura provides a good example to substantiate their belief.

The United Minority Front (U.M.F.) was established on November 1985. This party contested the 1985 elections and secured 17 seats out of 126 seats. A dominant section of the minorities might have thought that the Assam Accord signed between the AAGSP, AASU and the Government of India ran against their interest. So they refused to help the Congress in the elections of 1985. It is interesting to note that many

minority politicians who were with the Congress Party, until the Assam Accord was signed, became the brains behind the U.M.F. Though the nomenclature suggest that this party was a united front of the minorities, in reality it became a party dominated by Bengali speaking politicians. The U.M.F. refused to accept that the movement was launched only against the illegal immigrants and not against any Indians settled in Assam. According to them the movement was directed against the minorities. But whatever they said, they failed to give any evidence.

The Jatiyabadi Dal led by Mr. Nagen Hazarika came into existence during the 1978 Assembly election. This party supported the anti-foreigner agitation launched in Assam and later on they merged with the AAGSP. This party announced that unless this immigration is stopped, the unity and and integrity of the country will be jeopardized.

The Asom Gana Parishad was formed only after the accord was signed. The important part that the issues of migration plays in Assam politics is proved by the fact that it gave birth to a party like the AGP which seems to have established its hegemony. The Party's support structure is mainly the Assamese middle class. The articulate section of this class provides the leadership of the AGP. It is clear that the leadership of the movement never went



out of the hands of the Assamese middle class and the AGP which was born out of the movement remained very much in their hands. Because of this hegemonic positions, in the Asomiya society, the interest of the section is given importance and by and large, it came to be accepted as the interest of the entire Asomiya society.

Our analysis thus shows that immigration has remained a live issue in the politics of Assam. This issue not only influenced the politics of various parties but it has also generated political action on the part of certain section of the Assamese society. It is interesting to note that ever since the early twentieth century this issue exercised mind of the Assamese middle class so much that despite the hegemonic position enjoyed by the Congress Party and the national struggle for freedom penetrating the remotest of the areas they kept on pressing the demand for protecting their identity in the face of the onslaught of immigration. This demand forces associated with it became so powerful that none of the political parties could ignore it. Ultimately things came to such a pass that with the increased pressure on land the Assamese middle class could enlist the support of a vast section of the peasantry in their struggle against immigration. In the changed scene it became possible for the 'Assam Movement' launched by the AAGSP and the AASU to render almost all national parties

irrelevant in the politics of the State and to produce a regional party like the Assam Gana Parishad which captured power in the 1985 elections. The rise of regionalism in Assam could thus to a great extent be analysed in terms of the powers generated by unprecedented immigration to the State.

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