CHAPTER - III

THE PROBLEM OF IMMIGRATION IN THE
POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD UPTO 1978
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In Assam, the politics of immigration persistently overshadowed many other issues. In evaluating the trend and extent of immigration one cannot ignore the geographical realities and historical facts and compulsions which had undoubtedly governed the flow of population in Assam. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the problem of immigration is not a new problem. This problem and the possible threat to Assamese identity persisted even before independence. With the partition of the country on the eve of independence the situation took a turn for the worse. The fears of unprecedented demographic changes as a result of large scale immigration was such that in March 1947 an Assamese daily commented:

"The immigrants and the Muslim League should remember that the Assamese people came out with flying colours in their trials of 1942 and administration is still in the hands, Nationalist Assamese Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and all other inhabitants of Assam should unite solidly to fight immigrants. Immigration has increased the Muslim population from 13 percent to 34 percent in Assam. This is dangerous. It must be stopped." 1

The stream of immigration into Assam continued and it gathered momentum during the first half of the 1941-51 decades and specifically during the Muslim League Ministry in Assam upto

1946. The stream of settlers continued even after partition and the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar reported that during 1948-49, hundreds of Muslim immigrants regularly travelled by the hill-section railway from Badarpur to Lumding in order to go to Assam Valley for settlement. The Census Superintendent of Assam for 1951 also reported having seen himself persons coming by train during his tenure in Goalpara district. It was estimated in 1951 Census that about 430,000 persons migrated to Assam during the two preceding decades.²

The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha which met on 8th August 1947 said that with a view to save the existence of the Assamese people in Assam from total extermination by the onrush of the alien purchaser of lands, the Government of Assam should without least delay promulgate an ordinance that any land desired for sale by any private person be purchased by the government to be supplemented afterwards by the planned system of settlement under contemplation and this ordinance should be given effect from the year 1938 in which the land settlement policy was agreed upon by the tri-partite conference and all purchases and sales made with the foreigners during this period be made null and void.³

². Census of India (1951), Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I (A), General Reports.
At a time when the provincial Muslim League had launched the civil disobedience movement against the eviction policy of the Congress Government of Assam, the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha undertook the task of mobilising the Assamese opinion on the issue. In an appeal, "it described the activities of the Muslim League National Guards as Hitlers storm troopers bringing succour Germans in neighbouring countries and described the decisions of the Assam Bengal Muslim League joint committee of action to send large batches of volunteers to Assam for defying the eviction order as a corollary to the bigger plan of invading Assam which the Muslim League, in its view has been contemplating since the prospect of transferring power to Indian hands became a major issue in Indian politics." ¹

The non-refugee immigration into Assam from Eastern Bengal upto 1951 was only for settlement on land. In their anxiety to get land these settlers have at one time or another caused a great deal of friction by squatting on Government reserves or forcibly occupying the land of the local people from which it was difficult to evict them. They are however, excellent agriculturists and most industrious and they spend money freely at any rate on litigation.⁵

¹. "Invasion of Assam imminent". Hearty appeal to save her. A leaflet in Assamese and English issued by Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury (March 1947), p. 3.

The 1951 Census report, "described the settlers as land-hungry. Because their hunger for land was so great that in their eagerness to grasp more land they started encroaching on Government reserves and on lands belonging to local people."  

The census data on immigration from East Pakistan since partition is no guide to the reality because the birth place data collected in the census fully reflects the information supplied by individual respondents and the enumerators have no choice but to record the information as provided to them by the respondents. The result was that almost all the non-refugee immigrants gave their birth place as Assam. The reason for concealment of the actual birth place by the immigrants as stated in the 1961 census report of Assam was that the people coming from East Pakistan into Assam had nothing to gain by giving their true birth place while Muslims definitely had advantage in concealing the identity by saying that they speak Assamese. So although the increase in population in 1961 has been most spectacular for all the decades, the figures for migrants appear to be one of the lowest in terms of percentage due to concealment of correct birth place. However, the number of immigrants from East Pakistan

during 1951-61 has been estimated as 220,691 including 6582 East Pakistan Passport holders, according to the calculation made by census authorities.

The ethnic composition of the Muslim and Hindu immigrants during the decades 1911-1921 was 85 and 15 percent respectively. However it is observed that during the later decades the percentage of Muslim population was quite higher than their percentage in the population of the districts from where the settlers emigrated. As we have shown in Table V in Chapter II, the proportional growth of Muslim population in Assam since 1901 to 1971 provides a fairly clear picture of the extent of their unnoticed arrival in the Assam Valley.

Communal disturbances rocked Assam in February-March 1950. In the wake of riots, Nehru-Liaquat Pact was drawn up and most of the Muslim settlers who left for Pakistan due to the outbreak of communal disturbances in East Bengal and Assam, came back to Assam in the same year. The free movement between the then Pakistan and Assam, as provided by the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, subsequently resulted in fresh influx of Muslim immigrants to Assam.

It is alleged that there was hardly any machinery to keep track of the Pakistani Muslim immigrants, most of whom eventually settled in the state posing themselves as Indian
nationals with the support of their friends and relations. This, coupled with the influx of Hindu refugees, created an unprecedented problem in Assam. As senior journalist and freedom fighter of Assam argues, "discrimination against the religious minorities by the rulers in Pakistan also resulted in a mass exodus of Hindus from the then Pakistan to Assam."

The attempts to regulate the influx of Pakistani immigrants included the introduction of the passport-cum-visa system in October 1952. But the provision of foreigners Act 1946 and the rules made there-under were not applicable to the citizens of Pakistan and hence they were not required to get registered.

The effect of the partition of the country was strongly felt in the eastern sector. One of the most important sections of the pre-partition population whose contributions and sacrifices for the freedom of the country were second to none, found themselves third grade citizen of a hostile country. Partition brought endless misery for them and they eventually migrated to Assam.

People outside Assam believed that there was plenty of waste land available in Assam. But the actual pressure of population on agricultural land in Assam in 1951 was as high

9. Ibid., p. 16.
as 600 per sq. mile or 240 per sq.km. From humanitarian considerations, the Government of Assam agreed to rehabilitate 5 (five) lakhs Bengalee refugees. The actual number of migrants however, was much more. More than thirty three years have passed since then, but the unending human flow from across the border is yet to cease. Assam and Tripura received the largest number of refugees from East Pakistan. Their continuous influx has undoubtedly created demographic imbalance.

The influx of people from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) has continued unabated and the Assamese people began to view it as posing a serious threat to the economic, cultural and political identity of the people of the state. Government of India seemed to appreciate the problem and in the year 1950 passed the immigrant (expulsion from Assam) Act empowering the Central Government to detect and deport infiltrants from East Bengal which was then East Pakistan. In the statement of objects and reasons of the Bill presented to Parliament it was stated,

"During the last few months, a serious situation has arisen in Assam due to immigration from East Bengal. Such large migration is

11. Ibid., Loc.cit.
disturbing the economy of the state, besides giving rise to a serious law and order problem. The Bill seeks to confer necessary powers on the Central Government to deal with the situation." 12

Though the act was passed empowering the government to expel foreign immigrants from Assam, it was not taken seriously and was not implemented. Subsequently on 17th September 1957, the act was amended and certain clauses were repealed. Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi had advocated action against the infiltrators of East Pakistan. But there is hardly any evidence to show that he succeeded in this. After sometime Medhi resigned and Bimala Prasad Chaliha became the Chief Minister of Assam. However the Congress Party in Assam continued to be concerned about the impact of immigration. The Assam Committee of the Congress Party in Parliament in a representation dated June 27, 1962, had drawn pointed attention of the Prime Minister to the burning infiltration problem to Assam to which the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru replied on July 10, 1962, as follows:

"You refer to Pakistani infiltration. This is perfectly true. This infiltration has been taking place for a very long past. Therefore we should not look upon it as essentially a political move. Nevertheless it is true that this infiltration should be stopped and

effectively dealt with. I believe that much of this infiltration took place in the first five year, after independence when the border was not adequately guarded, probably it will be difficult now to deal with illegal immigrants who came before 1952. We might therefore fix 1952 as the date of our enquiry." 13

This assurance was also left practically unimplemented. Because a section of the Congress party treated the minority as their vote banks. So they refused to take any action which affect the interest of the minorities. It is quite clear from Devkanta Baruah's statement that Congress depended on Muslims and Tea-Garden labourers for vote. He said that "so long as alis and coolies are with the Congress Party it did not care for anybody." 14 (emphasis added).

In 1962, again the people of Assam brought to the notice of the Government of India the alarming increase of population of the state as was revealed by the census report of 1961 due to heavy influx of foreign nationals especially from East Pakistan during the years posing and creating a serious threat to the security and identity of Assamese people and also creating a law and order problem in the state. Representations were made to the Government of India suggesting important and urgent measures to be taken up to check

further influx of foreign nationals into the state and to deport the infiltrants expeditiously. On 1st of May, 1962, the Union Home Minister Sri Lal Bahadur Shastri declared the informal consultative committee meeting of Parliament for Home Affairs that the Central Government agreed to take measures to check the inflow of illegal entrants of Assam from across the borders as short term and long term ones. Some of the proposed measures were: increasing number of border check posts, strengthening of existing check posts, and the delegation of full powers under the Foreigners Act 1946, to the Superintendent of Police and Magistrates in border districts for the summary deportation of Pakistani infiltrators. It was also suggested by the members of the committee that deterrent and exemplary punishment should be meted out to those illegal entrants. But as Harendra Nath Baruah points out "no effective steps were taken for implementation of this declaration of the Home Minister." 

However no effective steps in this direction were probably taken because on 19th March 1964, the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party submitted a memorandum to Guljarilal

16. Ibid., Loc.cit.
17. Ibid., Loc.cit.
Nanda Home Minister of India. In the memorandum the Congress Parliamentary Party stated that there has been large scale infiltration of Pakistani nationals and they have been staying illegally without being detected. There has been no effective check on the border until now. To effectively control this infiltration, the Congress Parliamentary Party suggested that the,

"Indian East Pakistan border must be completely sealed and the area to such a depth as may be necessary from the border should be cleared. All weather road communication should be constructed for speedy movement of troops and for patrolling the border. The border check posts of the B.S.F. should also be increased to minimize the distance from one post to another."

It is clear that despite the apathy shown by the national leadership, the Congress Party in Assam continued to feel the necessity of checking infiltration. The Party seemed to have given considerable importance to the matter.

Home Minister Gulgarilal Nanda was quite aware of the large scale infiltrations into the state. He had visited some places of tension and held personal enquiries into some incidents perpetrated by these people in those places and found them to be true. He had suggested and ordered some remedial measures. Police was given some substantial power.

to detect and prosecute foreign infiltrants and some tribunals were constituted for their trial and deportation. The then Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha was obliged to take some measures for detection and deportation of foreigners. The then Chief Secretary of the State Government, A.N. Kidwai had himself admitted "that the way the immigrants came to Assam, it will take the government about thirty years to get rid of lakhs of these people who were there in the State. He also pointed out that the number of these foreigners will not remain constant and there will also be further infiltration of their like." Government of India's awareness of the problem was also reflected in a brochure published by the Government of India. In a remarkable display of clear understanding of the problem the brochure stated:

"long before the cry of Partition was heard in United India, the slow but steady encroachment of Assam and Tripura by immigrants from areas now in East Pakistan was already in progress. Partition did not assuage the land hunger in East Pakistan. The new international boundary was not physically marked on the ground, was largely unguarded and virtually unpatrolled. Thus the traditional migration from East Bengal continued even though a new political frontier had come into being, with East Pakistan on one side and the Indian territory of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal on the other."  


The partition of the country further accentuated the fears and anxieties by the Assamese elite for their distinct identity. After partition streams of Hindu refugees flowed to Assam from erstwhile East Pakistan (Bangladesh). "The 1951 census report showed the number of refugees in Assam as 274,145, of these 272,075 came from East Pakistan, 647 from West Pakistan and 1,733 from other unspecified areas. Because of its proximity to East Pakistan the Cachar district alone sheltered 93,177 refugees. The number of refugees in other districts was as follows - Goalpara 44,967, Kamrup 42,965, Darrang 18,883, Lakhimpur 13,965, Sibsagar 7,514, Khasi Hills 5,990, Garo Hills 5,072." 22

In 1944, Prof. Humayun Kabir, the then Private Secretary to Maulana Azad, the Central Education Minister writing in his monthly review 'India' commented that "one can easily visualise a Bengali state, comprising of about ten million people and living in a compact area. Such a state would include the present administrative province of Bengal and some of the outlying districts in Assam and Bihar. In fact the province of Assam may be wholly incorporated in it." 23 Such a statement made by a person so close to Maulana Azad, would naturally worsened the fears of the Assamese elite.

There has been a steady growth of the Muslim population in Assam. In 1961, the Muslims accounted for 43.3% in Kamrup. About 1,508,000 acres of agricultural land was under their occupation. The Muslim accounted for 23.3% of Assam total population in 1961 which shot up to 24.3% in 1971.\textsuperscript{24}

After Jammu and Kashmir, their number is the highest in Assam. Most of them came from Mymensingh and hence are called Mymensinghias in common parlance. "In 1951-61, 2,20,690 Muslims entered India. Between 1961-71, 1,91,339 Pakistani infiltrators were detected. In 1971, in the wake of liberation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) over 1,10,00,000 refugees came to India. Most of them returned to their homeland after the creation of Bangladesh, but about a million of them remained in India. Between 1971-1978, more Muslim infiltrators came and 99,583 immigrants were detected by the Assam Police. During the decade 1978-80, an increase of 53 lakhs of people was recorded in Assam alone."\textsuperscript{25}

In the post-independence period tribal belts were formed in 1948 in different regions to protect the tribal people of Assam. The Pakistan (Control) Act and the immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act were enacted in 1949 and

\textsuperscript{24} Census of India (Assam) 1961, Part I(A).
\textsuperscript{25} Myron Weiner, Sons of the Soil (Delhi, 1978), p. 93.
1950 respectively. The Acts provided for removing an immigrant (excepting displaced persons) whose stay was detrimental to the interest of the general public in India or any scheduled tribe in Assam. In Assam large areas in the plains district are inhabited by plains tribal people. A large number of outsiders mostly from East Bengal began to pour in large numbers into Assam. They began to spread into the areas occupied by these tribal people. The tribal people being naturally shy and unable to live in peace with these new comers, began to recede into the interior. The tribal villages were being encroached by immigrants so much so that as a result of such pressures some tribal villagers had to leave their own homes.

The Assam Land Revenue Manual published by the Government of Assam contains the reasons behind the formation of the existing 37 blocks and belts to safeguard the economic interest of the tribal people. It stated that large areas in the plains district are inhabited by tribal people. In nature, they are simple and were living in primitive conditions. Because of the lack of education and of material advantages they could not look after their own welfare and were incapable of protecting their own interest.

This official version has traced the history of immigrants into tribal blocks and belts. But the tribal continued to suffer. It attracted the minds of the Assamese so much that the All Assam Students' Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad demanded preservation of the tribal blocks and belts in accordance with the constitutional provisions meant for the tribal population of the state. In a memorandum they summed up the situation:

"The problem has badly hit the tribal population. All the 37 blocks and belts reserved for the tribal people are on the verge of extinction. Pressure on economy has reduced the sizes of the reserved tribal blocks. Forest resources are fast disappearing due to indiscriminate felling of trees and occupation of the area by the foreign nationals. The very identity of tribal population is in danger. The recent history of Tripura provides a good example to substantiate our belief."29

The Central Government have been in full knowledge of the alarming situation arising out of unabated infiltration of foreigners into Assam. In the year 1950, the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act 1950 was passed by the Parliament. Therefore the problem aid was officially recognised to have existed, as early as the birth of the Indian Republic. However, as is evident from the facts available in the enormous literature produced during the Assam agitation; "no positive

29. AASU's Memorandum to Prime Minister of India submitted in February, 1980, at Delhi.
steps were taken by the Union Government to prevent infiltration of foreigners into the north-eastern territories of India.\footnote{For information on these lines see, K. Mahanta and D. Sarmah, 'Defend Democratic Value in Assam' \emph{Economic and Political Weekly}, 26 July, 1980, p. 1337-38.} The Minister of State in the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation Sri Bhagwat Jha Azad in the Lok Sabha debate stated that "During 1968, on an average 394 migrants entered Assam from East Pakistan every month. During six months ending on the 29th December 1968, 2098 migrants came to Assam from East Pakistan. The Government of Assam decided to rehabilitate 12,000 families of the new migrants, i.e. those who came over to Assam from 1-1-64 onwards. Arrangements were made for the rehabilitation of those who are in excess of the quota 12,000 outside Assam. Regarding those who came recently, it was decided that after necessary screening, these people should be sent to Mana Relief Camps in Madhya Pradesh."\footnote{See, \emph{Lok Sabha Debates}, Vol. XXIV, No.1-5, 17th to 21st Feb., 1969, p. 107.}

In Assam, the problem of immigration has another dimension that is its impact on electoral politics. The Assamese fear that due to heavy immigration of foreigners into Assam, the indigenous population will be reduced to a minority and political power will go out of their hands. As we shall see in a later chapter a controversy over the electoral rolls for a by-election in Mangaldai constituency in 1978 led to an
unprecedented movement against foreign nationals. The election commission was aware of this problem, but never took any positive steps to prevent inclusion of foreigners names in the electoral rolls. "The directive sent by the Union Government on 2.8.75 to check the electoral rolls, to the state government and the union territories of the North Eastern region was also ignored by the State Government of Assam." 32 According to the seventh schedule of the Constitution the subject citizenship naturalisation of aliens admission and emigration and expulsion from India Passport and Visas are subjects related to the central list vide entry 17 and 19 of the said list. Therefore it is the constitutional duty of the central authority to stop influx of foreign nationals. Similarly preparation of electoral rolls is directly within the purview of the election commission. But the agencies concerned appeared to have failed to carry out their responsibilities.

The Bangladesh war of liberation of 1971 brought about a deluge in the Pakistani infiltration into the state. Assam population increased from 32,89,680 in 1901 to 146,25,153 in 1971, representing a rate of growth of 345 percent, as against an increase of 132 percent for India as a whole. Had Assam's population increased at national rate, it would have been 763,205 in 1971. Assam's actual population in 1971, therefore includes an excess of 6,993,095 representing 47.82 percent of its 1971 population. The following table shows the population trend in Assam and India:

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32. Inderjit, "Assam's Stir and Delhi's Apathy", The Assam Tribune (Gauhati, 30 Sept. 1983).
Table VII: Population Trend in Assam and India 1901-71

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>India Number</th>
<th>Decadal Variation %</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Assam Number</th>
<th>Decadal Variation %</th>
<th>Excess over India % of India's Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>236,281,245</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>32,89,680</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>252,122,410</td>
<td>+ 5.73</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>38,48,617</td>
<td>+ 16.99</td>
<td>11.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>251,352,261</td>
<td>- 0.31</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>46,36,980</td>
<td>+ 20.48</td>
<td>20.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>279,015,498</td>
<td>+ 11.01</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>55,60,371</td>
<td>+ 19.91</td>
<td>8.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>318,701,012</td>
<td>+ 14.22</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>66,94,790</td>
<td>+ 20.40</td>
<td>6.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>361,129,622</td>
<td>+ 13.31</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>80,28,856</td>
<td>+ 19.93</td>
<td>6.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>439,235,082</td>
<td>+ 21.64</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>8,37,329</td>
<td>+ 34.98</td>
<td>13.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>547,949,809</td>
<td>+ 24.75</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>146,25,153</td>
<td>+ 34.95</td>
<td>10.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, Various Reports.
Meanwhile, many of those refugees who came during the Indo-Pakistan war, stayed on illegally and began consolidating their settlements. Thousands move into riverine char or river islands where they formed tightly knit compact communities.

In Assam, infiltration was possible due to (i) mismanagement of the forest reserves and other Government lands, (ii) loose international borders, (iii) harbouring and shielding the illegal infiltrants by a section of the people. It may be mentioned here that Bengal was always a high density area in terms of population and it sought sanctuary in neighbouring lands. B.P. Sukla quotes from Muzibur Rahman's book *Eastern Pakistan - Its Population, Determination and Economics* which can be reproduced here:

"because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient lands for its huge population and Assam will give it full scope for expansion and because Assam has abundant forest and mineral resources, coal, petroleum etc. Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong." 33

There are some thinkers like Amalendu Guha and Sailadhar Rajkhowa who pointed out that the Assamese middle class with a view to employing cheap labour in their fields and homesteads had encouraged the influx of East Bengal men into

Assam. They also stated that the Assamese Mahajans had made the East Bengal peasants settle down in their land as well as in Government lands with the high hopes of becoming Zamindars. But their views cannot be accepted. As we have seen in the Preceding Chapter from the very beginning leaders like Ambika Giri Roychoudhury, Bishnuram Medhi, Gopinath Bordoloi opposed immigration. Guha and others are blissfully unaware of the fact that the entire Assamese middle class was not in favour of immigration but only a small section with vested landed interests encouraged immigration. We cannot blame the entire Assamese middle class for the deeds of a few. Dr. P.C. Goswami in his 'Economic development of Assam' also stated that "some Assamese who held larger areas on annual leases, employed immigrants ostensibly as hired labourers but in reality as tenants who paid rent as a share of the crop or possibly in a few cases in cash." 

The sense of insecurity has at times been given a communal tinge. Gyanchand for instance says, "In Assam, in which the numerical strength of the minority community the Muslims, is very near that of the majority community, the Hindus. The possibility of the number of Muslims exceeding

that of Hindus in the state cannot be ruled out. In Assam, particularly the danger can loom large, owing to the illicit immigration of the Muslims." It must be stated here that Muslim immigrants concentrated mostly on char areas and the Hindu immigrants scattered all over Assam. We shall however see in the next chapter that a large number of Assamese do not view it as a religious problem.