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Assam Movement and Assam Accord (1979–1985): A Review of Political Mobilization, Citizenship Conflict, and Policy Outcomes in Northeast India

Md. Rahmatulla Mozumder [a]*

[a] *University Department of Political Science, Munger University, Munger, Bihar, India*

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ABSTRACT

The Assam Movement (1979–1985) represents one of the most significant political agitations in post-independence India, emerging from anxieties surrounding illegal immigration, demographic transformation, and the preservation of indigenous identity in the northeastern state of Assam. The movement, spearheaded by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and supported by the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), demanded the detection, deletion, and deportation of foreign nationals from electoral rolls and public life. The immediate catalyst was the discovery of suspected illegal immigrants in the voter lists during the 1978 Mangaldoi parliamentary by-election. However, the roots of the crisis lay in a longer history of colonial migration policies and post-partition population movements that significantly altered the demographic composition of Assam.

The agitation lasted six years and involved mass protests, economic blockades, civil disobedience, and tragic episodes of ethnic violence, most notably the Nellie massacre of 1983. The movement culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Government of India and the leaders of the agitation. The Accord sought to establish March 25, 1971 as the cut-off date for citizenship and promised safeguards for Assamese cultural and political rights.

This review article examines the historical origins, major phases, and political consequences of the Assam Movement, while also assessing the implementation and long-term relevance of the Assam Accord. It argues that although the movement successfully placed the issue of illegal immigration on the national agenda, the incomplete implementation of the Accord has allowed tensions surrounding citizenship and identity to persist, particularly in the context of contemporary debates surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

1. Introduction:

The Assam Movement (1979–1985) represents a crucial turning point in India's post-independence political history [1-3], reflecting the tensions between regional identity, national citizenship policies, and demographic change. The movement was primarily driven by concerns about illegal immigration from neighboring Bangladesh and the perceived threat such migration posed to the cultural, linguistic, and political identity of the indigenous Assamese population [1].

Led initially by the **All Assam Students' Union (AASU)** and later supported by the **All Assam Gana**

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: rtulla357@gmail.com (Md. Rahmatulla Mozumder)

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Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) [2-3], the movement developed into a widespread mass mobilization that brought together students, intellectuals, farmers, and civil society organizations. Its central demand was the **identification and deportation of foreigners who had entered Assam after March 25, 1971**, the date marking the beginning of the Bangladesh Liberation War [4].

The immediate catalyst for the movement was the **Mangaldoi parliamentary by-election of 1978**, during which electoral authorities discovered a large number of suspected illegal immigrants registered as voters. This discovery triggered widespread public concern about the integrity of electoral rolls and the political marginalization of indigenous Assamese communities [9].

However, the roots of the crisis extended far beyond the electoral controversy. The demographic transformation of Assam had been unfolding for more than a century, beginning with British colonial policies that encouraged migration into the region for agricultural expansion and plantation labor [7]. Following India's independence in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, cross-border migration continued, intensifying fears among many Assamese that their cultural and political dominance was under threat.

Over six years, the Assam Movement witnessed large-scale protests, economic disruptions, and violent clashes. One of the most tragic events during this period was the **Nellie massacre of 1983**, in which more than two thousand people, mostly Bengali-speaking Muslims, were killed in communal violence [6].

The agitation eventually concluded with the signing of the **Assam Accord on August 15, 1985**, a tripartite agreement between the Government of India, AASU, and AAGSP. The Accord sought to address Assamese concerns by establishing a cut-off date for citizenship and promising safeguards for the protection of Assamese cultural and political identity [10].

Despite these provisions, debates over citizenship and immigration have continued to shape political discourse in Assam. The later implementation of the **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** and the passage of the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019** have reignited controversies surrounding the legacy of the Assam Movement [5].

This article reviews the historical origins, political trajectory, and contemporary relevance of the Assam Movement and the Assam Accord, emphasizing their role in shaping the politics of citizenship and identity in Northeast India [8-9].

2. Background and Causes

Understanding the Assam Movement requires examining the historical processes that produced demographic and political tensions in the region. Immigration into Assam has been shaped by colonial policies, partition-related displacement, and economic migration, all of which contributed to changing population patterns and local anxieties.

Colonial Legacy of Migration

The origins of large-scale migration into Assam can be traced to British colonial policies in the nineteenth century. Following the discovery of tea in Assam in the 1830s, the colonial administration encouraged the movement of laborers from central and eastern India to work in tea plantations, mines, and emerging industries [1].

In addition to plantation workers, the British also promoted agricultural settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley by encouraging Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants from East Bengal to cultivate unused land. This policy aimed to increase agricultural productivity and generate revenue for the colonial administration [7].

While economically beneficial to the colonial state, these migration policies gradually altered the demographic composition of Assam, creating tensions between indigenous communities and migrant populations.

Partition and Post - Independence Migration

The partition of India in 1947 triggered massive population movements across the subcontinent. Assam, which shares a long and porous border with East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), experienced significant migration during this period [9].

Political instability, economic hardship, and environmental disasters such as floods and river erosion in East Pakistan encouraged many people to migrate into Assam. The situation intensified after the **Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971**, when millions of refugees temporarily entered India [5].

Although many refugees later returned to Bangladesh, migration into Assam continued in subsequent decades, reinforcing fears among Assamese communities that they were becoming minorities in their own state.

Demographic Anxiety and Political Marginalization

By the 1970s, many Assamese citizens believed that immigration had begun to affect their access to land, employment, and political representation. These concerns were amplified by allegations that illegal immigrants were being registered as voters in electoral rolls [8].

The discovery of suspected foreign nationals in the voter lists during the **Mangaldoi by-election of 1978** triggered widespread protests. Student organizations, particularly AASU, demanded that the government identify and remove illegal immigrants from electoral rolls before conducting elections.

This demand evolved into a broader movement advocating for the protection of Assamese identity, language, and culture.

3. Major Events of the Movement

The Assam Movement unfolded over several phases between 1979 and 1985 and involved large-scale mobilization across the state.

Phase I: Mobilization (1979–1981)

The early phase of the movement focused on peaceful protests, strikes, and awareness campaigns organized by AASU and allied organizations. Demonstrations were held across Assam demanding the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants [4].

These protests disrupted administrative functioning and highlighted the growing distrust between the Assamese population and the central government [4-5].

Phase II: Escalation and Violence (1982–1983)

Tensions escalated dramatically when the Government of India decided to hold state elections in 1983 despite calls for a boycott by movement leaders. The elections were widely opposed in Assam and witnessed low voter turnout in many areas.

During this period, the **Nellie massacre of 1983** occurred, resulting in the deaths of more than 2,000 people and exposing the deep ethnic divisions within Assamese society [6].

Phase III: Negotiation and Settlement (1984–1985)

Following years of agitation and growing pressure for resolution, negotiations between the leaders of the movement and the Government of India intensified.

These discussions culminated in the **Assam Accord of 1985**, which formally ended the movement and outlined measures to address immigration and protect Assamese identity [10-11].

4. The Assam Accord (1985)

The Assam Accord represented a negotiated settlement designed to resolve the long-standing dispute over immigration and citizenship in the state.

The agreement established **March 25, 1971** as the cut-off date for determining citizenship. Individuals who entered Assam after this date were to be identified and deported, while those who arrived between 1966 and 1971 were to be temporarily disenfranchised [1].

The Accord also promised constitutional safeguards for Assamese culture and economic development initiatives for the region.

Despite these commitments, implementation proved difficult due to administrative challenges and political disagreements.

5. Post-Accord Developments

The implementation of the Assam Accord encountered numerous obstacles in the years following its signing.

One major challenge was the **Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983**, which placed the burden of proof on those accusing individuals of being illegal immigrants. Critics argued that this law made it extremely difficult to identify foreign nationals (Goswami, 2002).

In **2005**, the Supreme Court struck down the IMDT Act, ruling that it failed to address illegal immigration effectively and violated constitutional obligations to protect states from external threats (Supreme Court of India, 2005).

Later efforts to address the issue included the updating of the **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** in Assam. The final list published in 2019 excluded

approximately **1.9 million individuals**, generating widespread controversy and legal disputes.

The passage of the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019** further complicated the situation, as many Assamese groups viewed the law as contradicting the principles of the Assam Accord.

6. Critical Analysis

Scholars have offered differing interpretations of the Assam Movement. Some view it as a legitimate democratic movement aimed at protecting regional identity and political rights [1]. Others emphasize the movement's exclusionary tendencies and the violence that occurred during the agitation [6].

While the movement successfully drew national attention to the issue of illegal immigration, its legacy remains contested.

7. Contemporary Relevance

The legacy of the Assam Movement continues to shape contemporary politics in India. Debates surrounding the NRC and CAA demonstrate that questions of citizenship, migration, and identity remain unresolved [5].

These developments highlight the enduring relevance of the Assam Accord and the continuing challenge of balancing regional concerns with national policies.

8. Conclusion

The Assam Movement remains one of the most influential regional movements in modern India. It brought the issue of immigration and citizenship into national political discourse and forced the government to recognize the concerns of the Assamese people.

However, the incomplete implementation of the Assam Accord has allowed tensions to persist, particularly in the context of contemporary citizenship debates.

A sustainable solution will require policies that balance **regional identity, constitutional rights, and humanitarian considerations**.

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