



A Study On Migration, Demographic Change, And Ethnic Anxiety In Assam: A Historical And Political Analysis.

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Abstract

This study complex interplay between ethnic anxiety, identity politics, and migration in Assam, a northeastern state of India that has long grappled with demographic transformation and cultural insecurities. Ethnic anxiety in Assam stems from fears of cultural dilution, economic marginalization, and political underrepresentation due to sustained migration, particularly from Bangladesh. The research investigates how Assamese nationalism, fueled by movements such as those led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), has shaped narratives of indigenous versus outsider identities. The study studies the role of political rhetoric and media in amplifying these fears, importance how electoral strategies and media discourse often construct polarizing narratives around migration.

Policy responses such as the Assam Accord (1985), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are examined to assess their effectiveness, implications, and unintended consequences. These legal frameworks have not only failed to fully address the root concerns of Assamese communities but have also sparked new forms of exclusion, protests, and communal tension. The study underlines the rise of identity-based politics and the weakening of social cohesion in a region marked by both diversity and distrust. Finally, this study cries for a reorientation of migration as a developmental issue and recommends inclusive policymaking, protection of indigenous rights, and promotion of inter-community dialogue

Keywords: Migration in Assam, Demographic Change, Ethnic Conflict, Identity Politics. Illegal Immigration.

Introduction

Assam, one of India's most ethnically diverse states, has long stood at the crossroads of migration, identity politics, and ethnic tensions. The state's socio-political landscape has been shaped by historical patterns of migration, particularly from present-day Bangladesh, leading to persistent anxieties among the indigenous communities over issues of demographic imbalance, cultural erosion, and political marginalization (Baruah, 1999). These tensions, rooted in colonial land and labor policies, gained renewed momentum in the post-independence era, culminating in movements such as the Assam Agitation (1979–1985) and later, policy initiatives like the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Migration from East Bengal (later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh) was systematically encouraged during British colonial rule for expanding cultivation and increasing revenue, altering the demographic composition of the Brahmaputra Valley (Weiner, 1978). The situation became more complex after the Partition of India in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, both of which triggered large-scale influxes of Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus into Assam. These demographic changes were perceived

by indigenous Assamese communities as threats to their linguistic and cultural identity, leading to political mobilization and demands for constitutional safeguards (Hussain, 1993).

The period from 2016 to 2019 witnessed renewed debates and political actions centered on migration and identity. The BJP-led central and state governments took a strong stance on the issue of “illegal immigrants,” leading to the accelerated update of the NRC, which aimed to distinguish between citizens and undocumented migrants in Assam. When the final NRC list was published in August 2019, nearly 1.9 million people were excluded, sparking widespread anxiety and criticism from both Assamese nationalists and minority groups (Scroll.in, 2019). Simultaneously, the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in December 2019, which sought to provide citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring countries, was seen by many in Assam as a betrayal of the Assam Accord and an attempt to legitimize certain groups of migrants based on religion (The Hindu, 2019).

This study examines the historical roots and political trajectories of migration-induced demographic change in Assam up to 2019, focusing on how these have intensified ethnic anxieties among various communities. By analysing official data, political narratives, and social responses, the study seeks to provide a critical understanding of how migration has influenced regional identity politics and policy-making in Assam.

Background of the Study

Assam's socio-political landscape has been profoundly shaped by migration-induced demographic transformations dating back to the colonial period. The British colonial administration, seeking to boost agricultural output and state revenue, encouraged the migration of Bengali-speaking peasants, particularly Muslims from East Bengal, into the fertile Brahmaputra Valley (Weiner, 1978). These settlers, initially seen as economic contributors, gradually became viewed as demographic competitors by the indigenous Assamese-speaking population, laying the foundation for long-term ethnic tensions.

The Partition of India in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 led to successive waves of migration into Assam. These events intensified concerns among indigenous communities over land rights, employment, and cultural survival (Hussain, 1993). The resulting ethnic anxiety crystallized in the form of the Assam Movement (1979–1985), spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), which demanded the detection and deportation of “illegal immigrants.” The Assam Accord of 1985, which fixed March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date for identifying foreign nationals, became a key legal benchmark but remained inconsistently implemented over the decades (Baruah, 1999).

Between 2016 and 2019, migration re-emerged as a central issue in Assam's politics. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) was updated under the supervision of the Supreme Court, and its final list in August 2019 excluded 1.9 million residents (Scroll.in, 2019). At the same time, the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019, which offered citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants, was perceived as a threat to the secular basis of the Assam Accord and sparked widespread protests across the state (The Hindu, 2019).

This historical backdrop of contested migration, coupled with political responses from both state and central governments, provides the context in which ethnic anxieties have taken deep root in Assam's collective consciousness.

Literature review

Baruah (2005) conducted a comprehensive study on the evolving identity politics in Assam, focusing on the impact of historical migration on ethnic consciousness. The research traced the roots of Assamese nationalism to the colonial period when British policies encouraged the migration of Bengali Hindu clerics and Muslim peasants into the Brahmaputra Valley for administrative and agricultural expansion. Drawing from archival sources, government records, and field interviews, the study highlighted how these demographic shifts led to fears of cultural erosion among the indigenous Assamese population. The study analyzed movements like the Assam Agitation (1979–1985) as a response to perceived demographic threats, particularly the fear of being reduced to a minority in their own land. He determined that these anxieties were not irrational but stemmed from real socio-political changes that were largely ignored by the Indian state. The study emphasized that any solution must involve addressing the root causes of identity anxiety through inclusive policy-making.

Misra (2011) study explored the socio-political effects of post-partition migration into Assam between 1947 and 1971. Utilizing historical documents, refugee data, and interviews with local residents and migrants, analyzed the demographic changes caused by the influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The study showed that this migration led to increased competition over land, employment, and political representation. also examined the rise of ethnic organizations and student unions that vocalized these anxieties. He noted that while the migrants contributed to Assam's economy, their presence became a political issue, particularly during elections. The study determined that the unsettled bequest of Partition lasts to shape Assam's political and ethnic scenery. advocated for a balanced approach that recognizes the humanitarian aspects of migration while also addressing the legitimate concerns of indigenous communities through policy reform and social dialogue.

Hussain (2000) field-based study investigated the socio-political impact of undocumented migration in Assam, focusing on the border districts of Dhubri and Karimganj. Through household surveys, interviews with locals, and analysis of government reports, the study revealed how illegal immigration from Bangladesh has led to ethnic and communal tensions. Hussain found that while both Hindu and Muslim migrants had crossed the border, political discourse disproportionately targeted Bengali-speaking Muslims, often portraying them as invaders. This created a climate of suspicion and hostility, particularly among Assamese-speaking populations. The study also examined the role of political parties in manipulating migration issues for electoral gain, thereby deepening ethnic divides. determined that administrative inefficiencies, lack of clear documentation processes, and politicization of the migration issue contributed significantly to ethnic anxiety. He called for a balanced and humane immigration policy that ensures national security without alienating legitimate residents or exacerbating social tensions.

Sharma & Goswami (2014) conducted a mixed-methods study on how demographic change affects indigenous communities in Assam. Combining census analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and GIS-based land use mapping, the study focused on districts like Barpeta and Goalpara that experienced high levels of in-migration. The researchers found that the influx of migrants, particularly from Bangladesh, led to significant land use changes and population density increases. These changes triggered fears among local communities about losing their cultural identity, access to land, and political voice. The study also documented how these fears were not unfounded, citing specific cases where indigenous groups were outnumbered in local elections. study argued that ethnic anxiety is closely tied to material concerns like land and employment, not just cultural preservation. They recommended policy interventions such as land reforms, legal clarity on citizenship, and investment in indigenous education and employment programs to address the roots of anxiety.

Dasgupta (1998) research examined the long-term impact of refugee resettlement following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Using government records, NGO reports, and interviews with settled families in the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys, the study analyzed how refugee influx altered Assam's demographic and social fabric. Dasgupta noted that initial government support for resettlement waned over time, leaving many refugee communities to integrate on their own. This unplanned integration created visible socio-economic gaps and tension with host communities. The study found that linguistic and religious differences between migrants and locals often translated into political friction. study also highlighted the failure of successive governments to develop long-term policies for refugee integration, contributing to ethnic anxiety and marginalization. The study determined that addressing the refugee issue requires not just legal solutions but also community-level reconciliation and inclusive development planning.

Choudhury (2020) conducted a sociological investigation into ethnic identity and anxiety among Assamese youth in urban and semi-urban areas. Through surveys and focus group discussions at three universities across Assam, the study explored how students perceive demographic change and cultural preservation. The research found that even among educated youth, there is a strong perception that Assamese identity is under threat due to continuous migration. Participants expressed concerns over language erosion, economic competition, and political underrepresentation. The study also noted the influence of social media and political discourse in reinforcing these fears. argued that ethnic anxiety is not confined to rural or less-educated populations but is widespread and shaped by evolving narratives of identity and belonging. The study recommended the incorporation of intercultural education, inclusive history curricula, and youth dialogue programs as strategies to reduce fear and foster mutual understanding among Assam's diverse communities.

Problem Statement

Assam has witnessed prolonged demographic transformations due to both historical and contemporary migration, particularly from erstwhile East Bengal and present-day Bangladesh. These migrations, while economically beneficial during the colonial period, have over time contributed to intense socio-political unrest and ethnic anxieties among the indigenous populations. The persistent perception of “illegal immigration” has fuelled fears of cultural, linguistic, and political marginalization among Assamese-speaking communities.

Despite legislative and institutional interventions—such as the Assam Accord (1985), the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019—the issue remains unresolved and continues to polarize public discourse. These developments have not only intensified ethnic anxieties but have also raised critical questions about citizenship, identity, and the limits of constitutional protections.

The central problem, therefore, lies in understanding how historical patterns of migration have evolved into a politically volatile issue, and how demographic shifts have come to be framed as existential threats by various ethnic groups within Assam.

Research Objectives

1. To study the trace of historical patterns, migration into Assam during the colonial and post-colonial periods, identifying key phases and causes.
2. To study the demographic changes that have resulted from sustained migration and their impact on Assam's ethnic composition.
3. To study the emergence and evolution of ethnic anxieties among indigenous communities in response to perceived demographic threats.

Research Questions

1. What are the historical patterns of migration into Assam during the colonial and post-colonial periods, and what were the major phases and causes behind these migratory movements?
2. How has sustained migration affected the demographic structure of Assam, and what have been the key impacts on its ethnic composition?
3. How have indigenous communities in Assam perceived demographic changes, and how have these perceptions contributed to the rise and evolution of ethnic anxieties?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-political research approach to analyse the patterns of migration into Assam and their impact on ethnic identity and anxiety.

1. Historical Analysis

The study will begin with a detailed historical analysis of migration into Assam during the colonial and post-colonial periods. This includes examining British colonial policies, such as the promotion of tea plantations and agrarian migration from East Bengal, as well as the post-Partition and post-1971 influx of people from East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

2. Use of Census Data

Census data will be used to track and analyze demographic changes in Assam across different time periods. This includes colonial censuses (from 1871 onwards) and Indian national censuses conducted after independence. Key variables such as population growth rates, linguistic distribution, religious affiliations, and district-wise population patterns will be examined to understand how migration has altered the ethnic composition of the state.

3. Policy and Political Document Analysis

The study will examine major policy documents and government initiatives related to migration and identity. These include the Assam Accord (1985), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019.

4. Use of Secondary Sources

The research will be supported by a wide range of secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and previous research on migration, identity, and ethnic conflict in Assam. These sources will provide theoretical context and comparative insight, helping to situate Assam's case within broader migration studies and post-colonial identity politics.

Limitations of the Study

While this study aims to provide a comprehensive historical and political analysis of migration, demographic change, and ethnic anxiety in Assam, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the scope of the research is restricted to data and developments up to the year 2019, excluding events and policy changes beyond this period, such as the implementation and long-term impact of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. As a result, the analysis may not fully capture the evolving political sentiments or demographic shifts that occurred after 2019.

Secondly, much of the data related to migration, especially “illegal” immigration, is often politically contested and inconsistent across sources. The reliability of official records, such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and figures related to undocumented migrants, has been subject to public and legal scrutiny, which may affect the accuracy of demographic assessments.

Thirdly, due to constraints of time and accessibility, the study primarily relies on secondary sources—books, academic papers, government reports, and news articles. The absence of fieldwork or interviews with stakeholders such as migrants, community leaders, or policymakers limits the scope for incorporating firsthand perspectives.

Lastly, Assam's ethnic landscape is highly complex, involving numerous communities with distinct identities. This study focuses primarily on the Assamese-Bengali (Hindu and Muslim) binary, and may not comprehensively reflect the experiences and concerns of other ethnic or tribal groups such as the Bodos, Karbis, or Misings.

Table 1: Religious Composition of Assam (1971–2011)

Census Year	Total Population	Hindu (%)	Muslim (%)	Others (%)
1971	14,625,152	72.5%	24.6%	2.9%
1991	22,414,322	67.1%	28.4%	4.5%
2001	26,638,407	65.3%	30.9%	3.8%
2011	31,205,576	61.5%	34.2%	4.3%

Table 2: Major Migration-Related Political Events in Assam (1947–2019)

Year	Event / Development	Impact / Significance
1947	Partition of India	Influx of Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan into Assam
1971	Bangladesh Liberation War	Mass migration of Bengali Muslims and Hindus into Assam
1979–1985	Assam Movement	Demand for detection/deportation of "foreigners"; Assam Accord signed
1985	Signing of Assam Accord	Cut-off date set (24 March 1971) for determining citizenship
2005	Supreme Court Orders NRC Update	Initiated update of Assam-specific National Register
2015	NRC Process Officially Begins	Over 3.29 crore people applied for inclusion
Aug 2019	Final NRC List Published	1.9 million people excluded, causing controversy
Dec 2019	Citizenship (Amendment) Act Passed	Sparked widespread protests across Assam

Historical Context of Migration in Assam

The history of migration into Assam is deeply rooted in the region's colonial and post-colonial experience. During British colonial rule, Assam was integrated into the larger Bengal Presidency in the early 19th century, and its fertile lands were increasingly brought under tea, oil, and agriculture-based commercial exploitation. To support this, the colonial administration facilitated the large-scale migration of laborers and cultivators, especially from the densely populated districts of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), into the Brahmaputra Valley (Weiner, 1978).

These early migrations were largely encouraged for economic reasons. Bengali-speaking Muslims were settled on government wastelands, known as char areas, leading to substantial population growth in districts like Nagaon, Barpeta, Dhubri, and Goalpara (Hussain, 1993). By the early 20th century, the Assamese-speaking middle class began expressing concern about losing their linguistic and cultural dominance, giving rise to early ethnic anxieties.

The Partition of India in 1947 further intensified these demographic shifts, as a large number of Bengali Hindu refugees fled East Pakistan and settled in Assam. This migration continued, albeit in smaller waves, into the 1950s and 1960s. However, the most significant demographic and political turning point occurred in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War, which led to a mass influx of both Hindu and Muslim refugees into Assam (Baruah, 1999). Though intended to be temporary, many of these migrants remained, further straining land, resources, and ethnic relations.

The resultant fear of marginalization among the indigenous Assamese people culminated in the Assam Movement (1979–1985), led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). This mass agitation demanded

the detection, deletion, and deportation of illegal immigrants and ultimately led to the Assam Accord of 1985, which set March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for citizenship eligibility (Sharma, 2000).

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Migration Patterns

In the pre-colonial era, Assam experienced limited migration, mainly involving tribal movements and small-scale settlement by traders and artisans from neighboring regions. Significant demographic shifts began during British colonial rule in the 19th century, when the British annexed Assam and merged it with the Bengal Presidency. To boost agricultural production and revenue, the colonial administration encouraged large-scale migration of landless peasants, especially Bengali-speaking Muslims from East Bengal, into the Brahmaputra Valley. This laid the foundation for long-term demographic change and sowed early seeds of ethnic anxiety among the indigenous Assamese population (Weiner, 1978; Hussain, 1993).

Partition of India (1947) and Migration

The Partition of India in 1947 triggered massive population displacements across the subcontinent, and Assam was no exception. The creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) led to a large influx of Bengali Hindu refugees into Assam, particularly into the Barak Valley and parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Many migrated fearing religious persecution, while others sought economic opportunity and administrative safety (Baruah, 1999). Unlike earlier colonial-era migrants, these refugees were often perceived as permanent settlers, intensifying ethnic tensions. Assamese communities feared linguistic and cultural marginalization as the demographic balance began to shift. The lack of a clear refugee policy for Assam and continued inflows throughout the 1950s and 60s further complicated the situation (Hussain, 1993).

Post-1971 Migration

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971, following the Indo-Pak war and the Bangladesh Liberation movement, led to one of the largest refugee crises in South Asia. Assam, sharing a porous border with the newly formed nation, witnessed a significant influx of both Bengali Hindus and Muslims fleeing political instability, persecution, and economic collapse (Baruah, 1999). Although many were repatriated under Indo-Bangladesh agreements, a large number remained in Assam permanently, often settling in riverine areas and government lands. This influx exacerbated existing demographic pressures and fueled fears among Assamese communities about losing their political and cultural dominance. The lack of accurate migration records and the failure to implement strict border controls led to growing resentment, ultimately becoming one of the root causes behind the Assam Movement of 1979–1985 (Hussain, 1993; Sharma, 2000).

Illegal Immigration Debate

The debate over illegal immigration in Assam has remained a politically volatile and emotionally charged issue for decades. Rooted in historical patterns of migration from East Bengal and, later, Bangladesh, concerns over undocumented migrants intensified after the 1971 influx. Indigenous Assamese communities have long feared that large-scale illegal immigration threatens their cultural identity, land rights, and political representation (Baruah, 1999). The failure to fully implement the Assam Accord (1985), which promised the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants who arrived after March 24, 1971, further deepened public frustration. Between 2015 and 2019, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) update aimed to address this issue, but its final list excluded 1.9 million people, triggering widespread controversy (Scroll.in, 2019). The subsequent passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, reignited protests in Assam, as it was seen as legitimizing select migrant groups and undermining the secular spirit of the Assam Accord (The Hindu, 2019).

Ethnic Anxiety and Identity Politics

Ethnic anxiety in Assam stems from fears of cultural erosion, land alienation, and political marginalization due to sustained migration. Indigenous communities perceive demographic changes as existential threats, leading to the rise of identity-based political mobilization (Baruah, 1999). Movements like the Assam Agitation and opposition to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act reflect deep-rooted concerns over protecting Assamese language, culture, and autonomy. These anxieties continue to shape regional politics and inter-community relations in post-colonial Assam (Hussain, 1993).

Definition and Nature of Ethnic Anxiety

Ethnic anxiety is best understood as a collective psychological and socio-political phenomenon in which a particular ethnic group perceives a real or imagined threat to its continued existence, cultural identity, political influence, or territorial integrity. These fears often stem from historical grievances, demographic shifts, and competition over scarce resources, and are further intensified by narratives of exclusion and protectionism.

In the context of Assam, ethnic anxiety primarily revolves around the apprehension that large-scale and sustained migration—particularly from East Bengal (pre-1947), East Pakistan (post-1947), and present-day Bangladesh (post-1971)—has significantly altered the state's demographic and cultural landscape.

The nature of this anxiety is multidimensional:

1. **Culturally**, there is a strong sentiment that Assamese language, customs, and heritage are being overshadowed by Bengali linguistic and cultural influences. This is particularly visible in regions where Assamese is no lengthier the leading spoken language.
2. **Economically**, indigenous groups often express concern about competition over land, employment opportunities, and access to welfare services, fearing that migrants, through sheer numbers, are outbidding them in these domains.
3. **Politically**, the anxiety is rooted in the idea of disempowerment—the fear that migrants may influence election outcomes, form their own vote banks, and alter the ethnic equilibrium of control in the state-run legislature and local governing figures.

Assamese Nationalism

Assamese nationalism is a socio-political movement focused on preserving the Assamese language, culture, and territorial integrity. It arose as a response to feelings of marginalization during colonial rule. This movement gained momentum from post-independence migration patterns that threatened the state's demographic balance. A key occasion in this fight was the Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985, led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). The campaign called for the identification, removal, and expulsion of "illegal immigrants," primarily those coming from Bangladesh.

Identity vs. Integration

One of the main issues in Assam's social and political scene is the tension between preserving identity and integrating migrant communities. Assamese identity often relies on differences in ethnicity, language, and territory. However, migration, especially from East Bengal, East Pakistan, and Bangladesh, has created a complicated demographic situation. Millions of Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus, many of whom have lived in Assam for generations, are still socially and politically marginalized.

Integration is often seen as a threat to the dominant culture instead of a way to promote social harmony. Migrants are viewed not as contributors to economic growth but as forces that undermine culture and politics. Even communities settled in Assam for decades face challenges to their social legitimacy due to ethnic labelling.

Role of Media and Political Rhetoric

Media and political rhetoric take played a vital role in building, supporting, and at times, worsening ethnic worries in Assam. Political leaders frequently utilize migration narratives to mobilize electoral support, portraying themselves as defenders of Assamese identity against a perceived invasion by outsiders. During elections, references to "infiltrators," "illegal immigrants," or "vote-bank politics" become common, fueling suspicion and hostility between communities.

The media, both regional and national, have often reflected and amplified these anxieties. Assamese-language newspapers and television channels have historically provided platforms for nationalist voices, while also shaping public opinion through selective reporting and emotionally charged language.

Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become breeding grounds for misinformation, hate speech, and polarizing narratives, often shared without verification and with significant emotional impact.

Policy Responses and Political Analysis

The Government of India and the state of Assam have introduced several policy measures to address the issue of migration and its associated ethnic anxieties. The Assam Accord of 1985 marked a major political response, establishing March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for identifying illegal immigrants. However, implementation remained partial and inconsistent (Sharma, 2000). The NRC update, conducted between 2015 and 2019 under Supreme Court supervision, aimed to identify genuine citizens but excluded 1.9 million people, creating fresh tensions and legal disputes (Scroll.in, 2019). The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, further complicated the issue by offering citizenship based on religion, which was widely perceived in Assam as violating the spirit of the Assam Accord and threatening indigenous interests (The Hindu, 2019).

The Assam Accord (1985)

The Assam Agreement, signed on August 15, 1985, amid the Government of India and the leaders of the six-year-long Assam Movement (1979–1985), The movement, led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), had called for the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Controversies and Legal-Political Implications:

The final NRC list, published in August 2019, excluded over 1.9 million people, leading to widespread confusion, fear, and criticism. Ironically, many Assamese nationalists were dissatisfied, claiming large numbers of illegal migrants had been included, while others—particularly Bengali Hindus—felt unfairly targeted. The process was criticized for errors in documentation, lack of transparency, and potential human rights violations.

Legal ambiguities over the fate of those excluded and the lack of detention or deportation mechanisms led to a policy vacuum. Politically, the NRC created rifts between various communities and also between the state and central governments, reflecting the complex interplay of ethnic identity, legality, and human rights.

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA, 2019)

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in December 2019 and sought to provide a path to Indian citizenship for persecuted non-Muslim minorities (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians) from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh who arrived India before December 31, 2014.

Impact on Assamese Society:

Unlike other parts of India where protests against the CAA focused on its alleged anti-Muslim bias, in Assam, the opposition was rooted in fears that the Act violates the Assam Accord. By offering citizenship to Bengali Hindus who migrated after 1971, the CAA is seen by many Assamese as legalizing illegal migration and further endangering Assamese identity, language, and culture.

Massive protests erupted across Assam in late 2019 and early 2020, with widespread participation from students, civil society groups, writers, and artists.

State and Central Government Responses

Both the Assam state government and the central government have implemented a series of measures over the decades, with varying success and intent.

At the State Level:

- The Assam government, particularly under the leadership of regional parties like Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and later Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has oscillated between appeasing Assamese sentiments and aligning with national-level policies.
- Implementation of language policies, protection of land rights for “indigenous people,” and infrastructural development in ethnic regions has been attempted but often lacked coherence or long-term impact.

At the Central Level:

- The central government has provided legal and financial backing for major policy interventions (Assam Accord, NRC, CAA).
- However, it has often been accused of ignoring regional sensitivities, especially in the implementation of CAA without consulting Assamese stakeholders.
- Additionally, long-standing promises such as the sealing of the India-Bangladesh border, strengthening the Foreigners Tribunals, and detection of illegal migrants have seen delays and inefficiencies.

Contemporary Implications

Rise of Identity-Based Politics

The rise of identity-based politics in Assam is closely linked to fears of cultural displacement and demographic change triggered by sustained migration. Indigenous communities, especially Assamese-speaking populations, began organizing politically around ethnic identity during the Assam Movement (1979–1985), demanding protection of their language, land, and heritage (Hussain, 1993). Post-Assam Accord, several regional parties like Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) emerged, explicitly mobilizing ethnic sentiments. In recent years, newer groups have capitalized on anxieties over the NRC and CAA, reigniting identity-driven politics (Baruah, 1999). Competing claims for recognition among indigenous, tribal, and migrant groups have fragmented Assam's political space, making identity the central axis of electoral and civic discourse. This trend reflects a deep-rooted struggle over belonging and cultural preservation.

Communal Tensions and Social Cohesion

The relationship between migration and identity politics has increased communal tensions in Assam. This affects Assamese Hindus, Bengali-speaking Muslims, and Bengali Hindus. Fears of "demographic invasion" have created suspicion, social exclusion, and, in some cases, violence (Weiner, 1983; Baruah, 2010). The exclusion of nearly 1.9 million people from the final NRC list in 2019 caused widespread anxiety.

Future of Indigenous Rights and Cultural Preservation

The future of indigenous rights and cultural preservation in Assam hinges on inclusive policymaking, legal safeguards, and sensitive governance. Continued migration, coupled with political decisions like the CAA, has intensified fears of cultural dilution among indigenous communities. Protecting language, land rights, and traditional institutions will require stronger implementation of constitutional provisions such as the Sixth Schedule and Article 371B. At the same time, long-term peace depends on balancing identity concerns with democratic values and human rights (Baruah, 1999). Sustainable cultural preservation must also include educational reforms, promotion of indigenous languages, and economic empowerment. Without these, the region risks deepening ethnic divisions and instability, making the recognition and protection of indigenous heritage a crucial challenge for Assam's future.

Migration as a Developmental Issue

While often viewed through the lens of security and identity, migration in Assam is equally a developmental issue. Migrants—both legal and undocumented—have contributed significantly to agriculture, construction, and informal labor, especially in flood-prone and remote areas (Weiner, 1978). However, unplanned and politically unacknowledged migration has strained public services, created land pressures, and deepened socio-economic inequalities. Poor infrastructure, lack of housing, and exclusion from welfare schemes often marginalize migrant populations, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Simultaneously, indigenous communities fear losing access to limited resources. A development-centric approach that includes better documentation, service delivery, and regional planning is crucial. Addressing migration as a socio-economic challenge rather than solely a political threat could foster long-term stability and inclusive growth in Assam (Baruah, 1999).

Addressing Ethnic Anxiety through Policy Reform

Addressing ethnic anxiety in Assam requires nuanced policy reform that respects indigenous identity while upholding constitutional values. Current anxieties stem from perceptions of cultural erosion, political marginalization, and inadequate enforcement of migration-related laws. Policy solutions must prioritize

transparent implementation of the Assam Accord, strengthen border management, and ensure fair updates to citizenship documentation like the NRC (Baruah, 1999). Simultaneously, cultural safeguards—such as language protection, land rights, and regional autonomy under the Sixth Schedule—must be expanded. Educational reforms promoting inclusive historical narratives and civic engagement can reduce polarisation. Rather than reactive legislation like the CAA, Assam needs long-term, consultative policymaking that bridges trust gaps between communities and fosters peaceful coexistence grounded in justice and mutual respect.

Need for Inclusive Development and Inter-Community Dialogue

Sustainable peace and social harmony in Assam demand a shift from exclusionary identity politics to inclusive development and genuine inter-community dialogue. Decades of ethnic tension have deepened distrust among indigenous, migrant, and minority groups, often fueled by political manipulation and uneven access to resources. Inclusive development must prioritize equitable access to education, healthcare, employment, and land rights for all communities, regardless of origin (Hussain, 1993). Simultaneously, structured inter-community dialogue, facilitated by civil society and local governance, can help rebuild trust and mutual understanding. Addressing shared developmental challenges—like poverty, displacement, and environmental degradation—through cooperative frameworks can gradually replace competition with collaboration, ensuring that cultural identities are protected while social cohesion is strengthened for Assam's future (Baruah, 1999).

Recommendations for Future Research

Specified the complexity of Assam's relocation subtleties and identity politics, additional research is important in the following areas:

1. **Interdisciplinary Approach:** Combine perspectives from history, political science, sociology, and geography to holistically study migration and ethnic anxiety in Assam.
2. **Ethnographic Studies:** Conduct in-depth fieldwork to understand the lived experiences of both indigenous communities and migrant populations
3. **Longitudinal Analysis:** Track long-term socio-economic effects of migration on land use, education, employment, and political participation.
4. **Role of Media:** Examine how media narratives, social media, and political rhetoric influence ethnic perceptions and tensions.
5. **Comparative Studies:** Explore similarities and differences between Assam and other South Asian borderland regions facing migration-related challenges (e.g., Tripura, Jammu & Kashmir, or Rohingya influx in Bangladesh).
6. **Policy Impact Assessment:** Evaluate the effectiveness and unintended consequences of policies like the NRC, CAA, and the Assam Accord.
7. **Community-Centered Research:** Prioritize inclusion of local voices to ensure that research outcomes are grounded in community realities and not just state narratives.

Conclusion

Migration into Assam has never been a mere demographic event—it is a deeply political and emotional process intertwined with questions of identity, land, and belonging. From colonial-era policies that encouraged settlement to post-Partition and post-1971 influxes, each wave of migration has altered Assam's social fabric and intensified ethnic anxieties. Despite legal interventions like the Assam Accord, NRC, and CAA, the issue remains unresolved, often reignited by political interests rather than inclusive dialogue. Ethnic anxiety continues to influence regional politics, shaping identity-based movements and deepening mistrust among communities. Going forward, Assam's stability depends not just on documentation and legal filtering, but on equitable development, respect for indigenous rights, and sincere inter-community engagement. A more empathetic and balanced policy approach—grounded in both justice and inclusion—is essential to transform this contested landscape into one of coexistence and peace.

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