

Assam Facing an Existential Threat



Ankita Dutta



भारत नीति प्रतिष्ठान
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D-51, Hauz Khas,

New Delhi -110016 (India)

Tele: 011-26524018

Email: info@ipf.org.in, indiapolicy@gmail.com

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Introduction

The issue of immigration has been a deeply complex and sensitive one in the identity politics of Assam. However, it needs to be emphasised here that the problem of illegal immigration in Assam from across the border with Bangladesh is a serious political, economic and demographic issue. In fact, it is more about saving a community's cultural and civilisational pride, along with its religious identity.

For centuries, Indians, in all parts of the country, fiercely resisted all attacks by forces alien to their history and culture. But, unfortunately, continued brutalities and exploitation by these alien forces led to a defensive mind-set among Indians. This hesitation to be proactive has infested the psyche so much that even monstrous political and socio-economic crises are continuously ignored! The crisis facing Assam is no longer a war of swords and weapons, like the barbaric attacks in the medieval times, but a demographic war of numbers.

The policy of *Lebensraum* has been oft quoted publicly by several Islamic academics and political leaders on numerous occasions. Although not much has been specified as to how exactly this will happen, but they have given enough hints on how it is to be possibly executed. In his work '*The Myth of Independence*', Zulfikar Ali Bhutto writes,

"It would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan, though undoubtedly it is the most significant one. One at least is nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute, that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to East Pakistan. To these Pakistan has very good claims."

Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the founding-father of Bangladesh, clearly wrote in his booklet *Eastern Pakistan: Its Population and Economics*,

"Because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral

resources, coal, petroleum, etc. Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong.”

An analysis of the history of India-Bangladesh relations brings to light the fact that India had extensively supported and provided all possible help to Sheikh Mujibur Rehman of then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), who was at the forefront of the liberation war. Nevertheless, no matter how friendly India's relations with Bangladesh might be, it would be too naïve to ignore the dangers of large-scale illegal migration from Bangladesh over several decades. It has not only altered the demographic profile of the state of Assam, especially in the border districts of Lower Assam, but also poses a grave existential threat to the people and their culture and most importantly, to India's national security.

A Brief History of the Problem

Although Assam has always been a land favoured by migrants, the peculiarity of the migration problem here predominantly began in the late 19th century. It was around this time that the Assamese people had started employing cheap labour from the surrounding regions, especially East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), to work in their farms and agricultural fields.

The discovery of tea in Assam resulted in populating the state with people from different *janajati* communities, who were brought in from the Chhotanagpur region to work as labourers in the large British-owned tea estates. Gradually, migrants looking for job prospects in the North-eastern oil-fields were naturally attracted to the region. The British also encouraged Bengali Muslim peasants from present-day Bangladesh to move into Lower Assam for putting virgin lands under cultivation.

During Syed Muhammed Saadullah's Muslim League Ministry in Assam (1937-46), a concerted effort was being made to encourage the extensive migration of Bengali Muslims into Assam chiefly with the purpose of nourishing a political vote-bank. After partition, the porosity of the East Pakistan-Assam

border allowed unabated migration for the next several decades. Between the years 1947-1971, Assam saw two big waves of refugee influx. A continuous stream of politically victimised minorities, majority being Bengali-speaking Hindus from East Pakistan, were also coming and settling down in the Brahmaputra Valley.

While the Muslim migrants from East Pakistan were mostly landless economic refugees, the Bengali Hindu refugees were the victims of political and religious persecution in an Islamic state. The latter were largely from Sylhet, which had become a part of Pakistan at the time of Independence. Since they were ostracised in their own native lands for being Kafirs (non-Muslims), they later migrated into the adjoining areas of the Barak Valley, i.e. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.

By now, a deep sense of insecurity had already been created in the minds of the common public of Assam with respect to the alarming demographic change fuelled by the large-scale influx of Bengali migrants. It eventually culminated in the Assam Movement (1979-85) led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU).

One of the largest public mobilisations ever witnessed in post-Independent India, the Assam Movement began from the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency in 1979 due to a sudden increase in the population of the electorate by a whopping 80,000 voters within a span of just one year. The then Golap Borbora-led state government under the Janata Party accused the Congress Party of having 'imported' nearly 70,000 Bangladeshi Muslim refugees purely for electoral gains. Subsequently, the term 'illegal Bangladeshis' entered the lexicon of Indian politics, having significant electoral and strategic connotations for understanding the different manifestations of Assamese identity politics at different junctures in history.

Despite a strong demand of the agitators led by the AASU to undertake a full-fledged revision of the electoral rolls before conducting any elections in the state, the Congress Party went ahead with the assembly elections of 1980. Syeda Anwara

Taimur was elected as the first woman Chief Minister of Assam who held office from 1980-81. She took charge as the Chief Minister following a period of almost a year of President's Rule that the state had undergone after the collapse of the state government headed by Jogendra Nath Hazarika in December, 1979.

Keeping in mind the already volatile socio-political situation that the state was passing through, the choice of Anwara Taimur as the Chief Minister on the part of the Congress Party was a strategic one. It was from this time onwards that the Congress came to be identified as an all-time appeaser and saviour of the Muslim vote-bank in Assam, which had to be protected at all costs, even if it meant fomenting communal hatred against the native Hindus. Interestingly, Anwara Taimur was elected to the state legislative assembly from Dalgaon, a constituency in the Darrang district of Lower Assam that was and still is heavily dominated by Bengali Muslim immigrants.

Thus, without an iota of doubt, Anwara Taimur primarily represented the Muslim immigrant interests. The appointment of a Muslim in the highest political position of the state by the Congress Party amid the thick of a huge storm was laden with a strong message. The message was that the Muslim vote-bank in Assam would continue to be nurtured and not compromised under any eventuality. By doing so, the Congress wanted to bring home the point that despite all probable backlash from the leaders and supporters of the Assam Movement, the political interests of the new immigrants from Bangladesh would be very well safeguarded. It was a clear departure from the earlier position of the Congress Party which was based on persuading Assamese Muslim politicians to not aspire for the top post in the state. In the words of Sanjib Barua, "They were instead encouraged to seek greener pastures in the pan-Indian arena, because it was feared that their chief ministership could be read as a sign of growing immigrant power."

With the appointment of Anwara Taimur as the Chief Minister, strict measures were brought in to discipline ethnic

Assamese government employees, especially senior officials who were known sympathisers of the Assam Movement. The idea was to use more force, both political and administrative, in order to stem the tide of the movement. With this purpose in mind, Taimur very effectively and gradually transformed the state bureaucracy, and the officials who occupied its top offices were made to tow the Congress line. For example, it was reported that her personal secretariat consisted of only Muslim professionals. As argued by Sanjib Barua, “These measures accentuated the legitimacy crisis in the state”.

The Seriousness of the Problem

The Census data of 2011 reveals a steep rise in the immigrant population in nine border districts of Assam. While Muslims constituted 30.9% of the population in 2001, this share jumped to 34.2% in 2011. Dhubri, the constituency of AIUFD chief Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, had the largest Muslim population of 80%. Barpeta, another border district in Lower Assam, showed the highest growth rate of Muslim population between the two census years, i.e. around 12%. The expansionist nature of Islam and the rapid mushrooming of mosques in Assam have made the native Hindu population wary and fearful of the consequences that await them as they fear to become a minority in their own state in the near future.

A Report on ‘**Illegal Migration into Assam**’ submitted to the President of India by the then Governor of Assam Lt. Gen S.K. Sinha (Retd.) in 1998 clearly showed that the Muslim population of Assam rose by 77.42% in 1991 from what it was in 1971. Comparatively, in the same period, the Hindu population had risen by a mere 41.89%. This rapidly changing demography has led to heightened ethnic tensions in the recent past, with conflicts breaking out frequently in different parts of the state. For example, in July 2012, violence broke out between members of the Bodo tribe and Bengali-speaking Muslims in the BTAD area, when unidentified miscreants, suspected to be Muslims,

killed four Bodo youths at a place called Joypur in Kokrajhar district.

Among the several eye-witness accounts that had been provided by the report, one stands out particularly (quoted from the report):

Shri E.N. Rammohan, DG. BSF, who is an IPS officer of the Assam cadre, in his report of 10 February, 1997 has stated, *“As an additional S.P. in 1968 in Nowgaon, I did not see a single Bangladeshi village in Jagiroad or in Kaziranga. In 1982, when I was posted as DIGP, Northern Range, Tezpur, five new Bangladeshi Muslim villages had come up near Jagiroad and hundreds of families had built up their huts encroaching into the land of the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary.”* He mentioned that in 1971, the large island of Chawlkhowa comprising 5000 bighas of land was being cultivated by Assamese villagers from Gorukhut and Sanuna and went on to state, *“In 1982, when I was posted as DIGP, Tezpur, there was a population of more than 10,000 immigrant Muslims on the island. The pleas of the Assamese villagers to the district administration to evict those people from the island fell on deaf ears. Any honest, young IAS, SDO of Mangaldoi sub-division who tried to do this, found himself transferred. In 1983 when an election was forced on the people of Assam...the people of the villages living on the banks of the Brahmaputra opposite Chawlkhowa attacked the encroachers of this island, when they found that they had been given voting rights by the Government. It is of interest that the Assamese Muslims of Sanuna village attacked the Bengalis Muslim encroachers on this island. I am a direct witness to this.”*

It is universally accepted that the rise of Maulana Badruddin Ajmal in the political scenario of Assam has largely been aided by the rapidly changing demographic character of the state. The gradual reach and expansion of his party – the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) – both in terms of vote-share and seat-share, is a proof of the fact. It may be mentioned here that in 2011, Anwara Taimur had quit the Congress Party and joined

Ajmal's AIUDF. She was later appointed the Vice-President of the AIUDF.

While there is still lack of credible data and reliable figures on the exact number of Bangladeshi nationals staying in India illegally, there is no doubt that the flow of illegal immigrants continues unabated. On November 16, 2016, Kiren Rijju, the then Union Minister for Home Affairs stated in the Rajya Sabha that an estimated 20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants are staying in entire India; and, most of these immigrants are said to have settled in Assam and West Bengal while many have moved into the interiors of the country, even reaching metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai in many instances. Undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants are largely uneducated, and generally occupy the lowest rungs of the labour force.

Besides the threat of demographic change as a result of illegal immigration, another serious danger looming large not only over Assam but that of the entire country is of a “second partition” with the complete or partial loss of Lower Assam to Bangladesh, aided and abetted by international Islamic terrorist groups and their sponsors such as Pakistan's ISI. In the words of Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha (ret'd) himself, the former Governor of Assam,

“The rapid growth of international Islamic fundamentalism may provide the main driving force for this demand. The loss of Lower Assam will sever the entire North-East from the rest of India and the rich natural resources of that region will be lost thereafter.”

Although misinformation was spread by a section of media during the anti-CAA protests in Assam, but certain genuine Assamese concerns regarding language and resources over the CAA cannot be ignored. At the same time, the scourge of increasing illegal immigration of people largely belonging to one particular religious community is also a real-time danger. In Tripura, the local tribals of the erstwhile princely state became a minority in their own land due to a huge influx of Bengali-speaking immigrants from what is now Bangladesh, at the time

of India's Partition in 1947. This was being held up as a cautionary tale by Assam during the anti-CAA protests. The need of the hour is a strong political will backed by effective implementation machinery to address the issue, without, however, hurting the sentiments of the people.

What lies ahead for the Assamese people?

Assam serves as the gateway to the other states of the Northeast and also shares an international boundary with Bangladesh and Bhutan. Till 1826, Assam was the stronghold of a fiercely independent Ahom kingdom which, with all its might, thwarted multiple invasion attempts by the Mughals that otherwise affected most other parts of India. People belonging to diverse groups and communities have prospered and inhabited the plains and hills of Assam since the medieval times. Today, Assam represents a diverse and unique mosaic of around 115 different communities and groups of people, supplemented by dozens of unique and endangered languages.

Unfortunately, many of the indigenous communities of Assam, at present, number fewer than 10,000 people! They are now at the grip of a looming threat of socio-cultural extinction chiefly propelled by immigration. A senior advocate of the Supreme Court of India, Upamanyu Hazarika, had earlier informed that there exist a few villages in Darrang district of Assam where immigrants not only outnumber the natives but the latter have been pushed into ghetto-like dwellings in their own ancestral abode. The ramifications of this unabated immigration of people have now come to severely bear upon the vital statistics of the state in terms of basic self-sufficient sustenance.

The ruling BJP government in Assam came to power on the avowed mission of safeguarding the indigenous people's land, language, culture and heritage. A lot, however, still needs to be done in this direction. For example, illegal immigration and land encroachment are majorly responsible for the continuous marginalisation of several indigenous tribes of the state. A case in point would be to understand the demographic transition of

Lumding region in undivided Nagaon district (note: Nagaon is one among the several districts of Assam which has severely borne the brunt of the state's demographic distress). In the Census of 1901, 31% of the district's population consisted of *janajatis* who were believed to be nature-worshippers.

Today, Census data barely finds any count of such nature-worshippers in the district. Many of the smaller groups of *janajatis* got either wiped out or moved out to other districts, as a result of the increasing pressure exerted on their land and resources by the incoming immigrant population. A leading Assamese daily reported that out of the 1,44,000 voters in Lumding constituency, only 10,000 were tribals, predominantly belonging to the Dimasa community. In fact, the name 'Lumding' itself traces its roots to the Dimasa language. Once the traditional homeland of the Dimasas, now Lumding is chiefly dominated by a non-indigenous population of immigrants. The natives were not only stripped of their land rights but have also been rendered economically vulnerable and politically insignificant. Sadly, not a single Dimasa person has represented the constituency, till date!

Today, a demographic and socio-cultural crisis engulfs most of the Hindu religious institutions of Assam. As per a newspaper report published way back in September 2010, more than 7,000 bighas of land belonging to 39 Sattras of Assam are in the grip of illegal encroachers of suspicious nationality. This was the opinion of the then advisor of the Axom Sattra Mahasabha (parent organisation of all the Sattras of Assam) Sri Sri Bhadrakrishna Goswami. It was during this time that the Gauhati High Court had also directed the state government to free Sattra lands from illegal encroachment. In this respect, the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police of the districts under which these Sattras fell, had been asked to evict the encroachers at the earliest (*Deccan Herald*, september 17, 2010).

Among the worst-affected ones are the Ram-Rai Kuti Sattrasal Sattra in Dhubri, Rampur Sattra in Nagaon, Adi-Alengi

Sattras, Barpeta Sattras, Kobaikata and Alipukhuri Sattras in Morigaon district, and a few more. For instance, the Ram-Rai Kuti Sattras in Dhubri has almost 1,000 bighas of its land occupied by illegal encroachers, of which around 500 bighas are located in the ‘No Man’s Land’ along the Indo-Bangladesh border. Assam CM Sarbananda Sonowal, while visiting the Bardowa Sattras in Nagaon district of central Assam after it was cleared of encroachers in September 2016, had clearly said that the eviction process will continue till all the 700 Sattras across the state are made free from illegal occupants. However, it is still a long way to go!

The Supreme Court of India had also taken note of this crisis and termed it as an “external aggression” in the case of Sarbananda Sonowal vs. Union of India (2005). The court clearly stated –

“This being the situation, there can be no manner of doubt that the state of Assam is facing ‘external aggression and internal disturbance’ on account of the large-scale illegal migration of Bangladeshi nationals. It, therefore, becomes the duty of the Union of India to take all measures for protection of the state of Assam from such external aggression and internal disturbance as enjoined in Article 355 of the Constitution. Having regard to this constitutional mandate, the question arises whether the Union of India has taken any measures for that purpose.”

In fact, it was way back in 1992 that an internal report prepared by the Union Home Ministry had suggested that illegal immigration has vastly changed the “demographic landscape” of the eastern border states of India, especially Assam and West Bengal. Although Bangladesh has been steadfast in its continuous denial of the fact that its citizens regularly cross over the border to India, but the country’s census figures tell a different story altogether of the missing millions.

Sharifa Begum, a demographer at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in Dhaka, calculated that nearly 3.5 million people “disappeared” from East Pakistan during 1951-

61, probably as a result of the Partition of India. She indicated that another 1.5 million may have entered India during the period 1961-74. But, according to journalist Sanjoy Hazarika, an important fact which is mostly kept under the wraps is that a quarter of the 10 million refugees who came to India during the 1971 liberation war probably stayed behind. Intelligence reports have also pointed fingers at the Jamaat-e-Islami and its patron, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan, which have been using madarsas that have sprouted in increasing numbers along the Indo-Bangladesh border to infiltrate migrants into India to be used as spies.

Native Assamese are of the suspicion that some influential land mafias have sold lands to suspected illegal Bangladeshis, which has changed the entire demographic complexion of the area within few years. It was during the later years of the Congress government in the state that the local representatives of the party indirectly helped and supported these illegal settlers to carry out their anti-social activities, all with the idea of nourishing a political vote-bank. It is this politically-motivated encroachment of land, including lands belonging to Hindu religious institutions such as temples and Namghars that has now become a serious existential crisis for the people of Assam.

Many suspected illegal Bangladeshis have settled not only in the area surrounding Tezpur LAC, but also at Dulabari, Bhumuraguri, Batomari, Bhumuraguri Pahar, Barghat, Barghuli, Napaam (Sulmara), Bhumuraguri bridge to Bishnu Prasad Rabha Samadhi Kshetra on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. They have also occupied a huge chunk of government lands at the Burhachapori Reserve Forest area. In fact, in the Thelamara-Owbari area near the newly-established Polytechnic College, about 300 bighas of government land have already been encroached upon by suspected illegal Bangladeshi nationals. Among the nine LACs in Sonitpur district, Sootea, Biswanath, Tezpur, and Barchala have been the most highly affected ones. Local people are of the opinion that after making these areas their safe haven, the illegal immigrants carry out various

unlawful activities such as car-lifting, burglary, theft and robbery, running of cow smuggling syndicates in close association with certain local influential people, etc.

Academic Dishonesty & Non-Acceptance of the Problem

The immigration issue has now become a question of existential survival for the common people of Assam. The Assam Movement (1979-85), the Brahma Committee Report on Land Rights, Upamanyu Hazarika's one-man Commission on border-sealing, NRC, the anti-CAA movement and most recently, the Clause 6 recommendations of the Assam Accord (1985) – all had the immigration issue as a contributory factor at the very least. In fact, the Upamanyu Hzarika Commission Report even mentioned that illegal immigration from Bangladesh is threatening to reduce the indigenous population of Assam to a minority in their own homeland by the year 2047. Quite unfortunately, these claims, when made by the common Assamese people, have been repeatedly slandered by a section of the illegal immigration apologists in media and academia as 'xenophobic', and sometimes even as 'Islamophobic'!

This is a dangerous trend indeed! It gained further traction during the process of finalising of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), when it came to be portrayed in front of the national and international audience as an exercise of disenfranchising the Muslim population of Assam and thus robbing them of their citizenship rights, by declaring a vast majority of the community as illegals and non-citizens. Although the NRC was at first initiated during the previous Congress government in the state under the leadership of Assam's former CM Tarun Gogoi, but the fact that the preparation of the NRC was undertaken on a serious note under the BJP government, was used as an excuse to spread this propaganda. It was this one-sided and hypocritical narrative that quite comfortably brushed aside the truth that it was only citizenship and not religion that formed the basis of inclusion versus exclusion in the NRC.

Interestingly, when the final draft of the NRC was released, it faced vehement criticism from all fronts of the Assamese society and was rejected by all stakeholders. But, the reason put forward by immigration apologists was that the ruling BJP rejected it primarily because of the exclusion of many Hindu Bengalis. The fact that the names of a large section of the indigenous population of the state were also excluded from the final NRC list featured nowhere in their so-called “academic” writings and statements. It is this lobby of agenda-peddling journalists, academicians, activists and so-called “jatiyotabadinetas” too, who have frequently ridiculed the genuine concerns of the common people as fool-hardy opinions based on an ultra-jingoistic nationalist ideology! And, they have always been indulging in this propaganda through selective interpretation and re-interpretation of data while conveniently skipping over some brutally honest facts.

For instance, they often like to refer to S.K. Sinha’s report on illegal migration as unreliable, claiming that Lt Gen S.K. Sinha quotes a 1931 report submitted by a British civil-servant C.S. Mullan, thus making it outdated. But, they have never bothered to mention the fact that Sinha’s report also made use of updated data from the Intelligence Bureau and Census Reports showing an unnatural increase in the population growth rate of multiple constituencies in Lower Assam. Some have even went to the extent of terming Gen Sinha’s report as the basis of Assamese nationalist ideology, while the truth is that the report had more to do with national security than the protection of the rights of the common Assamese. Curiously enough, Gen Sinha had mentioned in his report that the consequences of large-scale immigration need to be emphatically stressed upon and no misconceived and mistaken notions of secularism should be allowed to come in the way of doing so.

This illegalimmigration nexus is also at the forefront of organising prominent national and international conferences, seminars, webinars, and conventions at frequent intervals in not only Assam, but also across different cities in India and abroad.

By taking recourse to half-truths and in some extreme cases even blatant lies, they are responsible for vilifying the NRC process in Assam as a ‘xenophobic exercise’ aimed at making a large section of the people stateless. Whenever the issue of illegal immigration is raised, they try to emphasise on the “economic” role of these illegal immigrants in the Assamese society, ignoring the larger concerns of internal security and the massive demographic and cultural change that has taken place in several districts of Assam, especially the border districts of Dhubri and Barpeta in Lower Assam.

It is high time that these people shed their romance with political correctness, and accept the ugly reality of the never-ending migration of Bangladeshis into Assam, assisted by the corrupt political leaders. The economic and political survival of these illegal immigrants over the years has been facilitated through dubious documents such as forged Voter ID cards, ration cards, etc. with the blessings of a corrupt bureaucrat-politician nexus. Besides the huge demographic shift that it has created in several districts of the state, the twin menaces of illegal immigration and land encroachment have now become a serious threat for the culture and civilisation of Assam.

Thus, Assam’s unending problem of illegal immigration continues to be a deeply complex one engulfing all spheres of its social, political and economic lives. A nefarious agenda that swears by the liberal logic of tolerance and secularism is to be blamed for much of the problems that the state is facing today! It amounts to denigrating the genuine concerns of a community for basic survival against an ever-expanding threat. People of Assam have the right to preserve and protect their culture, as guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

Possible solutions to the problem

Implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord that seeks to safeguard and protect native communities and preservation of the sensitive socio-ethnic profile of the state, must be given priority.

Although the CAA, 2019 is a welcome step ahead to differentiate between ‘persecuted minorities’ of Bangladesh who have sought asylum in India and illegal immigrants, but, strong and credible measures need to be taken by the state in order to prevent the illegal migrants from making use of the CAA by making false claims of their religious identity. As far as the question of resettlement of the beneficiaries of the CAA is concerned, Assam alone should not be made to bear all the burden of accomodating them. They should be resettled across the country in order to prevent local mutual animosity and inter-ethnic rivalry.

It is high time that the Government of India initiates discussions with the Government of Bangladesh on the issues of identification, verification and deportation of the illegal immigrants. This is a humungous task which has been made further complicated by close kinship relations, common language, and a corrupt bureaucrat-criminal-politician nexus. In this exercise, the service of the common people of a locality where demographic change has been starkly visible, can be sought to assist the government in the identification of the infiltrators.

Once the illegal infiltrators are identified, the Government of India can consider providing a section of them with work-permits , but only after proper verification of the necessary travel documents, till they are deported to their homeland. Keeping in mind the concerns of safety and security of the common people, the persons with work-permits must be allowed in only certain restricted locations and for a specified time-period, aided by regular police surveillance.

Strict legal and penal action must be taken against criminal elements and notorious agents who are responsible for facilitating infiltration into Assam, either through the porous land boundary or the riverine/maritime boundary with Bangladesh. Providing safe haven to a foreign national and concealing his/her presence in any area must also be declared as a crime under the Indian Foreigners’ Act, 1946.

Besides vigorous patrolling in the border, barbed-wire fencing, electrification and installation of flood-lights, etc. needs to be completed within the shortest possible time-frame, considering the seriousness of the issue.

Better coordination and communication among the various security agencies is a must to help curb infiltration and also keep a strict eye on the illegal cattle smuggling market that is rampant in the border districts of Assam.

From the people's side, they seriously need to get rid of their sloth and *laahe-laahe* ('go-slow') attitude in order to secure their own future from an alien force that is gradually weakening Assamese culture from within. It is the apathy towards physical labour among the common Assamese people that has, in fact, greatly helped in paving the way for the poor immigrants to occupy the space in several areas of Upper Assam too, where their presence was quite negligible or low till a few years back.

There has always been a malicious attempt on the part of the urban English-speaking media houses supported by an elite cabal of "eminent public intellectuals" to portray the issue in a way that seeks to garner as much sympathy as possible for those "poor, economically deprived migrants". Unfortunately, this has downplayed the real concerns of national security and increasing pressure on limited agricultural land and resources created by the spate of illegal immigrants from across the border. With time, the issue has been reduced to the binaries of Hindu-Muslim divide in the media and academic circles, rather than generating a sense of political awareness that the fear of becoming an alien in one's own land has more to do with culture and not religion.

The attempt to be politically correct has often meant either overlooking or completely ignoring the official figures which have shown a disproportionate increase in the Muslim population of Assam over the past few decades. Political correctness aside, the issue of illegal immigration from across the porous border with Bangladesh is a serious economic, political and cultural problem that has silently been invading the Assamese society

from within. No other issue in the last 70 years has vitiated the political climate of Assam more than the immigration problem.

At a time when the issue of migration has toppled governments and global political paradigms in the West, not anticipating a popular reaction from the larger Assamese society where almost one-third of the population has become that of immigrants is politically too naïve! Their fear of cultural and political decimation and eventually becoming a minority at the hands of a foreign force is a palpable emotion which is no longer to be dismissed lightly. Assam is changing demographically, and it is changing too fast. The change is alarming. It's high time that the problem is no longer pushed behind the curtains of liberalism and secularism. It is all about self-preservation and protection of the culture of a community in the wake of a serious threat to its civilisation.

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The author holds a doctorate degree in
Political Science from the Centre for
Political Studies, JNU, and is currently working in
Assam as an independent researcher.



भारत नीति प्रतिष्ठान
India Policy Foundation

D-51, Hauz Khas, New Delhi-110016 (India)

Tele : +91-11-26524018 Fax : +91-11-46089365

E-mail : info@ipf.org.in, indiapolicy@gmail.com

Website: www.ipf.org.in