

# Issues of Migration and Ethnic Clash in Bodoland: A Critical Analysis

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## Abstract

The issue of Bangladeshi illegal migration has troubled the state of Assam for decades. The lack of authentic data on illegal migrant flows only adds to the discomfort. The illegal Bangladeshi migrants issue tends to dominate the political, economic and social discourses in Assam. The lack of data on migration adds to a sense of being 'under siege' by outsiders as no one is sure as to the number of migrants visibly infiltrating all walks of life in Assam. The recent disturbances in Kokrajhar and Dhubri districts of Assam have once again brought the issue of ethnic clash between Muslim and Bodo communities. There is no evidence to suggest that the latest violence is a direct consequence of illegal immigration. The clash between Muslims and Bodos is often misinterpreted as a clash between illegal Bangladeshis and indigenous people. This clash is due to the political and communal conspiracy created by some fundamentalists and political leaders to gain their political mileage. As a consequence, a large number of innocent men, women and children lost their lives. This has certainly pushed back the development issues of the state and destroyed the fraternity between the two communities. This paper will try to examine that the recent clashes in Kokrajhar and Dhubri districts are not due to the problem of migration but the fears of losing land and identities connected with land.

## Introduction

The issue of Bangladeshi illegal migration has troubled the state of Assam for decades. The lack of authentic data on illegal migrant flows only adds to the discomfort. The illegal Bangladeshi migrants issue tends to dominate the political, economic and social discourses in Assam. The lack of data on migration adds to a sense of being 'under siege' by outsiders as no one is sure as to the number of migrants visibly infiltrating all walks of life in Assam. The recent disturbances in Kokrajhar and Dhubri districts of Assam have once again brought the issue of ethnic clash between Muslim and Bodo communities. There is no evidence to suggest that the latest violence is a direct consequence of illegal immigration. The clash between Muslims and Bodos is often misinterpreted as a clash between illegal Bangladeshis and indigenous people.

Since 19 July 2012, the riots in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) consisting Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts and the neighbouring Dhubri district of Assam have

claimed about 113 lives. Out of the 113 deceased, 81 belong to Muslim community and 20 belong to the Bodo community. The number of the displaced goes over 4,00,000 (Seikh, 2013). This internal displacement has been veritably described as the largest one since India's partition. It did not take long to paint the riots in Assam as a "communal" one along the lines (Hindus vs Muslims) witnessed in mainland India for centuries. As a violent demonstration was staged at Azad Maidan in Mumbai on 11 August 2012 to protest against the attacks on the Muslims in Myanmar and Assam (both unrelated) and over 50,000 people hailing from North East India fled from various states of mainland India due to the physical attacks and threats from religious fundamentalists, a riot that started over local disputes and extortion by the insurgents in Assam became a national issue. Illegal immigration of Bangladeshi Muslims became the hot potato, though there is no evidence to suggest that illegal immigration was the immediate cause for the riots.

## The Problem

The phenomenon of immigration of Bengali speaking Muslims into lower Assam is a matter of concern and that it is impossible to hide it from the data. The fact stands out conspicuously in all census data since 1901, when the British purposively started settling Bengali Muslims, especially from the East Bengal district of Mymensingh, in the lower Assam districts of the Brahmaputra valley. As a consequence, the proportion of Muslims in Assam rose from 15 per cent in 1901 to 25 percent in 1951. The numbers of Muslims in the state in this period rose from less than 5 lakh in 1901 to nearly 20 lakh in 1951. Population of Hindus in Assam in that period had only doubled, from 29 lakh to 59 lakh. Even the latter figure is high compared with the average growth of population in India during that period, which indicates some migration of Hindus too. There was a ploy of propaganda from the print and electronic media that-

1. The illegal immigration from the neighbouring country has changed the demographic profile of Assam (Vij, 2013).
2. The border districts of Assam (Bangladesh border) have been transforming to Muslim dominating districts, which may be a great threat to the demography of the state.
3. The illegal immigrants have occupied the land of the indigenous people and that has provoked

the indigenous to have a clash with the Bangladeshi (Vij, 2013).

4. One of the causes of ethnic clash between Bodos and illegal immigrants is the unnatural growth of population among the illegal immigrants.

But the entire perception developed by the print and electronic media is far from the ground reality. It was also a matter of concern that media had played a biased role in favour of some political groups and that had created more tension and spread rumours among the common people.

**Issue of migration and Bangladeshi**

The migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal into Assam has certainly transformed the demography of the state, more particularly in some districts, but to claim all of it happened owing to illegal immigration from Bangladesh is not only historically incorrect, but a wrong interpretation of facts (Vij, 2013). The following data in the Table No. 1 shows the high decadal population growth rate of Assam since 1951, as per the Census of India.

**Table-1**  
Percentage of decadal variation in population since 1951 in India and Assam

	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1971-91	1991-2001	2001-11
India	21.64	24.80	24.66	54.41	21.54	17.64
Assam	34.98	34.95	-	53.26	18.92	16.93
Dhubri	43.74	43.26	-	45.65	22.97	24.40
Dhemaji	75.21	103.42	-	107.50	19.45	20.30
Karbi-Anglong	79.21	68.28	-	74.72	22.72	18.69

Source: Vij, 2013

If the decadal growth rate of population in Assam is compared with that of India, particularly taking note of the historical background of the large scale migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal in the decades preceding partition since the late 1800s during British colonial rule, the figures would look almost conclusively that such an influx must have continued alarmingly. If the decadal growth rate of population in the Dhubri district of Assam (Table-1), which borders Bangladesh and also has the highest percentage of Muslim population (74.29 percent) among the 27 districts of Assam, is added to the comparison, it would appear to be among the most conclusive evidence of illegal immigration with growth rates much higher than that of Assam as a whole. Even then, the above figures of decadal growth rates of population do not provide sufficient evidence to prove influx of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants into Assam. It

would be pertinent to point out rightly that this high population growth rate in Assam has declined since 1971 and has remained lower than that of India (Table-1), categorically refuting assumptions of continuing illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

It is also observed that decadal growth rates of population in the two districts of Assam, namely, Dhemaji and Karbi Anglong are almost more than twice of Assam and substantially higher than even the Muslim majority border districts of Assam. Yet, the Muslim population in Dhemaji and Karbi Anglong is very low. The Hindu population in these two districts is 95.94 per cent and 82.39 per cent respectively and Muslims constitute merely 1.84 per cent and 2.22 per cent of the total population. But the population growth of these two districts between 1961-71 was 103.42 per cent in Dhemaji and 68.28 per cent in Karbi Anglong respectively. This should be a testimony enough that there could be reasons apart from illegal immigration or having a Muslim population behind a high decadal growth rate of population (Vij, 2013).

The above figures categorically reveal that selective citing of census data claiming "abnormally high" decadal growth rate of population cannot be the conclusive evidence of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Furthermore, against Assam having just three districts bordering Bangladesh, Meghalaya has five, which have shown higher decadal growth rates of population than the districts of Assam, yet have an insignificant Muslim population negating any suspicion that they could have been swamped by illegal Bangladeshis. This also negates the presumption that merely bordering Bangladesh would make a district vulnerable to illegal immigration.

The immigration of Bengali Muslim peasants from the erstwhile East Bengal began in the 1800s after the British annexed Assam in 1826, with the "Treaty of Yandaboo" after defeating the Burmese in the First Anglo Burmese war. "Malevolent" colonial politics of the British in Bengal, such as the "permanent Settlement", had already wreaked havoc on Bengal's economy and turned its artisans and peasantry into poor subjects. Severe exploitation under its Zamindari system added to the woes of the peasantry. In the geographically contiguous province of Assam, population density was low, land was abundant and there no Zamindari system. It was just a matter of time before an impoverished and harassed Bengali Muslim peasantry began migration into Assam that was encouraged by the British. It served their purpose to settle large numbers of Bengalis on vacant land to increase land revenue, as well as have readily available cheap labour in a labour deficient province. Initially, the immigrants were welcomed even by the Assamese land gentry for the cheap labour. By the second decade of the 20 th century, however, this continuous influx became a cause for alarm and a "Line System" was

introduced in the affected districts of Nagaon and Kamrup about the year 1920, restricting immigrants from settling beyond certain limits on land over which natives claimed their rights. That is how vast tracts of land in the then undivided Nagaon, Kamrup and Goalpara districts came to be settled by immigrant Bengali Muslim peasants in the decades before partition, and independence.

With each successive group of immigrants and with restrictions imposed barring their indiscriminate spread, the quality of land they found to settle themselves on became progressively degraded. Many were left to settle on marshy wastelands and the shifting sandbars of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries called "chars or chaparies" in the vast floodplains of the valley. This is where a substantial percentage of their descendants still live after nearly a century. At the mercy of recurring floods, regular shifting of the "chars" and continuous erosion of their lands by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, a large percentage of the Muslim population of immigrants origin in these districts has been rendered homeless regularly. For their livelihood, they often migrate to the towns and cities as construction labourers, vegetable vendors or rickshaw pullers. Living in towns and cities, they create a picture of a ghost of illegal Bangladeshis in the minds of the hostile urban elite with little sympathy or insight into the realities of life or about the areas they have migrated from.

Table-2  
Population in percentage as per religion and language in districts of Assam with Substantial Muslim population as per census of India 2001

	Religion		Language		Decadal growth rate	Population density per sq. km
	Muslim	Hindu	Assamese	Bengali		
Assam	30.92	64.89	48.80	27.54	18.92	397
Dhubri	74.29	24.73	70.07	24.15	22.97	941
Goalpara	53.71	38.21	46.25	32.78	23.03	451
Barpeta	59.36	40.19	47.00	44.67	19.62	521
Marigaon	47.58	52.21	66.37	28.21	21.35	500
Nagaon	50.99	47.79	60.22	31.23	22.26	583
Karimganj	52.30	46.69	00.42	85.84	21.87	557
Hailakandi	57.99	41.11	00.26	83.43	20.89	409
Cachar	36.13	67.37	00.63	74.63	18.89	382
Bongaigaon	38.52	59.17	42.61	38.78	22.09	355
Darrang	35.54	57.73	39.15	30.76	22.18	411

Source: Source: Vij, 2013

Thus, by the time of India's partition and independence, there was a substantial Bengali Muslim population of immigrant origin noticeably concentrated in areas of Nagaon, Kamrup and Goalpara districts. Owing to their socio-economic conditions and cultural practices, it is entirely believable that their population growth rates have remained substantially higher. But, what is reflected in the decadal growth rates of Muslim population in these districts, or the ones curved out of them later, their numbers need not necessarily be due to continuous illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

## Recent Violence and Immigrants

Immigrants and natives in Assam have lived in close proximity for over a century and even though there would be occasional friction, even over land, these would usually be local and rarely spread out to become ethnic or communal bloodbath unless fuelled or designed by using certain diabolic political narratives pitting natives against immigrants and perpetrated as pre-planned acts of violence.

To understand the recent violence that saw Bodos pitted against Bengali speakers, it would be pertinent to point out that the Adivashis have faced similar ethnic violence in Kokrajhar since the 1990s. They weren't illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh but descendants of those exiled by British for the uprising in 1855 that history refers to as the Santhal rebellion. Neither did they rapaciously usurp land on which the Bodos had claimed nor were numbers growing so fast so as to pose a threat to the numerical significance of the Bodos.

The root cause of the present violence in Assam is the tussle over "control over land". Kokrajhar and Chirang were predominantly Bodo tribal majority areas till the 1990s. But there was migration of Bengali speaking Muslims mostly to the Gossaigaon subdivision area in Kokrajhar district since the beginning of 1990s. These immigrant Muslims are mainly agricultural labourers and daily wage earners hired in construction works, agriculture and brick-clans. Immigrant Muslims procured lands from many Bodos in Gossaigaon areas and outnumbered Bodos in many villages. So the underlying theme of the violence was nothing but the fight of two groups of people over the control of economic resources. The control over land by immigrant Muslims in Bodo heartland and the increasing number of immigrant Muslims in Kokrajhar and other districts of BTC created fear psychosis among Bodos, who thought that their land and identity were in danger (Munir et al., 2012).

As per census of India 2001, Hindus constituted 65.60 per cent, Muslim 20.36 per cent and Christians 13.72 per cent of Kokrajhar's population. A large number of Bodos would be Hindus, but some would be Christians too. The Adivashis would be overwhelmingly Christian and the Muslims would be of immigrant origin. The data on language from the census further reveal that Bodos constituted 32.37 per cent, Bengalis 21.06 per cent, Assamese 20.28 and Santhals 16.70 percent of Kokrajhar's population. The decadal growth rate of Kokrajhar between 2001 and 2011 has been among the lowest, at just 5.19 per cent. This low population growth is also substantiated by the increase in population density by just 5.26 per cent from 266 to 280 persons per sq. km. Thus, between 2001 and 2011 there couldn't have been any alarming change in demography of the district. Therefore, it appears extremely unlikely that a rapacious 'invasion' of illegal

immigrants could be a reason for the widespread violent native-immigrant conflict here.

There is a perception that Kokrajhar violence is a part of an attempt to revive the Bodo movement. Speculation is also rife that this was abetted by elements inimical to Assam's Chief Minister Shri Tarun Gogoi from within his own party in order to subvert him by creating an impression that he is losing his grip on the law and order situation of the state.

### Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that these tensions between Bodos and Bengali speaking Muslims are nothing new to the region. What makes the violence of the recent years different from the earlier tensions is the level of viciousness. Rumours were largely in circulation both among the Bodos and Muslims about the alleged plans of the others to create violence. So the fear psychosis was made to prevail where victims turned aggressors out of fear of attack (Munir et al., 2012).

As rumours and violence spread, lakhs of Bodos and Muslims alike fled their villages and relocated in make-shift relief camps in schools and public buildings. In this crucial period, instead of appealing to the people to maintain peace and harmony, some fundamentalists and political leaders with their explosive speeches tried to malign the situation. There also emerged sinister political forces who, instead of focusing on the immediate need to stop the killings and the violence, started mud-slinging. L.K Advani BJP senior leader after visiting the state blamed the state government and illegal Bangladeshi immigrants for the

violence. Taking a dig at the state government Praveen Togadia, VHP leader, even blamed Tarun Gogoi as being the Chief Minister of Bangladesh, and said, "Hindus should unite and cooperate with Bodos to fight against invasion" (Munir et al., 2012).

It is the right time for the people to understand that this kind of violence is not the solution to any problem; rather this may make the original problem more critical. For the development of BTC area and Assam, the people will have to develop humanitarian values, fraternity, and respect for other communities in the greater interests of the nation.

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