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Politics on Immigration of Population in Assam: A Study on Ground Reality

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Abstract

The population structure of a region is fundamentally influenced by sex ratios, rural-urban distributions, age dynamics, religion, and language, with overall population growth governed by birth rates, death rates, and net migration. While natural growth is a standard demographic phenomenon, growth driven by international migration raises severe legal and domestic security concerns. Since India's independence, Assam's changing population structure and the accelerated growth of its Muslim population relative to other communities have sparked intense debate over whether this shift is driven by natural dynamics or cross-border immigration. This study investigates the evolving population structure of Assam, evaluates the depth of the immigration crisis, and analyses key socio-political indicators, including comparative community growth rates, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and "D" (Doubtful) Voters.

Keywords: Politics, Population Immigration, Muslim population, National Register of Citizens.

1. Introduction

Assam, a northeastern state of India, possesses a demographically diverse population. Since antiquity, the migration of people from various ethnic backgrounds into the region has been a defining feature. While the people of Assam have historically been welcoming to outsiders, local elites first articulated anti-outsider resentment during the colonial period in the late nineteenth century. This era witnessed both the birth of Assamese nationalism and an unprecedented wave of rapid, large-scale immigration of numerous communities into the state. By the late 1920s, Assamese anti-immigration attitudes had increasingly crystallized. During the post-independence period, this issue gradually evolved into a central political concern, resulting in ongoing structural tensions, intermittent violence, and bloodshed.

Data indicates that Assam's population grew by 34.95% between 1951 and 1971, compared to 19.93% for India as a whole. However, population growth alone cannot establish the citizenship status of individuals; demographic change and individual legal status remain distinct questions. Over time, immigration concerns became deeply intertwined with questions of identity, political representation, land ownership, language, and access to public resources. These anxieties ultimately culminated in widespread demands for a reliable register of citizens.

In 2009, the non-governmental organization Assam Public Works (APW) approached the Supreme Court of India seeking an update to the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Following the Court's directives in 2014, the process moved forward, with the core updating work beginning in earnest in 2015. The final NRC list was subsequently published on 31 August 2019. The central objective of this paper is to evaluate whether this process, its reported results, and the available legal remedies can effectively address citizenship concerns while simultaneously protecting procedural fairness and social harmony.

The influx of Bangladeshi immigrants into Assam and the resulting shift in the state's demographic composition have become major concerns, presenting significant challenges to local cultural identity and national security. Observers note that, similar to trends historically seen in Tripura and Sikkim, this influx threatens to reduce the indigenous Assamese population to a minority within their own state. Because of historical ties as well as geographical proximity, cross-border migration into Northeast India has persisted throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, Assam's shifting population structure since independence remains a foundational challenge for the state. Amid claims regarding the disproportionate growth of the Muslim population relative to other communities, it is critical to investigate whether this shift is driven by natural demographic dynamics or cross-border immigration. Accordingly, this study investigates the evolving population structure in Assam and attempts to analyse the actual depth of the immigration issue in the state.

2. Importance of the Study

The demographic evolution of Assam holds profound socio-political, cultural, and national security implications. The present study is relevant for following specific reasons.

- **Identity and Security Threats:** Unchecked immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh poses a direct threat to the indigenous population's cultural identity and India's

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national security. It risks marginalizing the native Assamese populace, akin to historical precedents in Tripura and Sikkim.

- **Socio-Economic Pressures:** Intense competition for fertile agricultural land and limited employment opportunities creates severe localized friction.
- **Policy Relevance:** Understanding the ground realities behind population surges, fertility trends across diverse religious groups, and legal mechanisms like the NRC and Foreigners' Tribunals is crucial for formulating balanced, equitable, and legally sound policy interventions.

3. Review of Literature

- **Historical Migration Patterns:** Academic literature and official documentation note that steady migration into Assam has occurred since antiquity due to geographical proximity and fertile land. Colonial policies and subsequent administrative actions—such as the Muslim League administration's "Grow More Food" campaign—actively incentivized East Bengal cultivators to settle in Assam's low-lying *char* (riverine) areas.
- **Legislative and State Interventions:** Various historical strategies have been deployed to manage the immigration crisis. These include the Line System, the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950, the Prevention of Infiltration of Pakistani Nationals into India (PIP) scheme of 1962, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983, and the Supreme Court-mandated update to the National Register of Citizens (NRC).
- **Study Gaps**: Prior research often conflates overall community growth rates with direct illegal infiltration without robustly evaluating internal socio-economic variables or granular, decade-wise religious comparisons. This study attempts to bridge these gaps by analyzing empirical census data alongside recent administrative records.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the historical and ongoing changes in the population structure of Assam during the 20th and 21st centuries.
- To examine these structural changes through an in-depth comparative analysis of the growing demographic share of the Muslim population relative to other communities in Assam.
- To evaluate census data regarding Muslim population growth rates, the immigration crisis, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and "D" (Doubtful) Voters.
- To suggest some policy implementations for solution of immigration of population in Assam.

5. Methodology of the Study

This study employs an analytical and descriptive research design based on quantitative time-series secondary data. The research utilizes secondary data sources and historical documentation to construct an empirical foundation such as Decadal census reports from the Census of India (1901 to 2011), National Family Health Surveys (NFHS), and statistical bulletins provided by the Government of Assam, Official White Papers on the foreigners' issue (Government of Assam, 2012), legislative assembly disclosures, and administrative reports concerning Foreigners' Tribunals and "D" Voter tracking.

6. Interpretation and Analysis

i). Changing Population Structure of Assam (20th Century)

Assam's population expanded dramatically from 32.29 lakh in 1901 to 312.05 lakh in 2011—an overall increase of 948.48%, compared to India's national growth of 508.12%. Decadal growth rates in Assam outpaced national averages significantly up to the 1971 census, after which the statistical growth curves began to converge.

Table 1: Trend of Population Growth in Assam.

Census Year	Population of Assam in Lakh	Decadal Growth of Assam (%)	Decadal Growth of India (%)	Assam's share of India (%)
1901	32.90	—	—	1.38
1911	38.49	16.99	5.75	1.53
1921	46.37	20.48	-0.31	1.85
1931	55.60	19.91	11.60	1.99
1941	66.95	20.40	14.22	2.10
1951	80.29	19.93	13.31	2.22
1961	108.37	34.98	21.51	2.47
1971	146.25	34.95	24.80	2.67
1981	180.41	23.36	24.66	2.64
1991	224.14	24.24	23.85	2.65
2001	266.56	18.92	21.54	2.59
2011	312.05	17.07	17.64	2.58

Source: *Population census data form Census commission of India (1901 to 2011)*

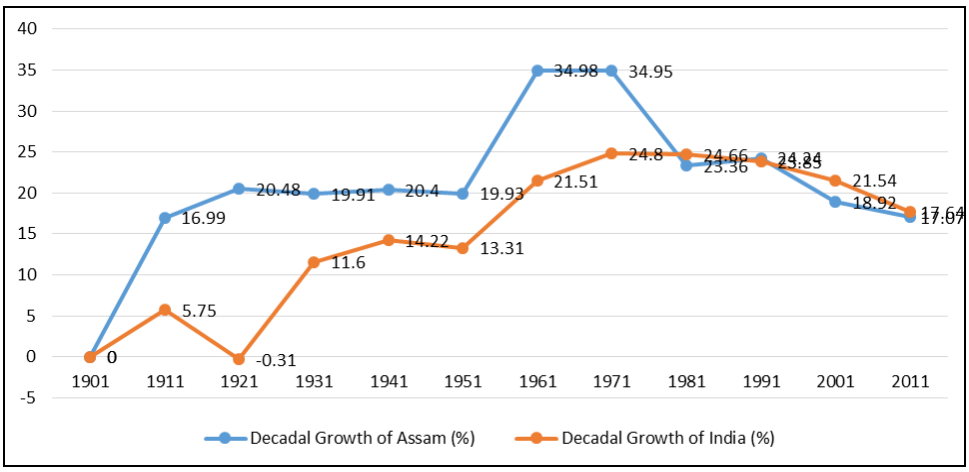


Fig-1

The first phase, spanning 1901 to 1951, exhibited steady population growth, during which Assam's population increased from 32.90 lakh to 80.29 lakh. A marked acceleration occurred during the 1951–1971 period, with the population rising from 80.29 lakh in 1951 to 108.37 lakh in 1961, and subsequently to 146.25 lakh in 1971. After 1971, the decadal growth rate began a downward trend, declining to 23.36% in 1981, followed by 24.24% in 1991, 18.92% in 2001, and 17.07% in 2011. Although the population continued to expand in absolute terms, the velocity of this increase was lower than the peaks recorded during the 1961 and 1971 census operations.

A comparative analysis with national data reveals that Assam's decadal growth rate outpaced India's national average across most intervals listed in Table 1. For instance, in 1911, Assam recorded a 16.99% growth rate compared to India's 5.75%. In 1981, Assam's growth rate stood at 23.36%, falling slightly below the national average of 24.66%. Conversely, in 1991, Assam recorded 24.24% against India's 23.85%, making the state's rate marginally higher. By 2001 and 2011, Assam's reported growth rates (18.92% and 17.07%) had dropped below India's national averages of 21.54% and 17.64%, respectively. Thus, the empirical data indicates that Assam's population growth was disproportionately high relative to India.

ii). Muslim Population Growth Compared to Other Communities

A critical dimension of Assam's demographic discourse is the historical trajectory of the Muslim population relative to non-Muslim communities (predominantly Hindus and Christians). In 1901, Muslims accounted for 12.4% of Assam's total population, while non-Muslims constituted 87.6%. Over the ensuing decades, the Muslim demographic share experienced a steady upward trajectory, reaching 34.22% in the 2011 Census compared to the non-Muslim 65.78%.

Table 2: Trend of Muslim population compare to Non-Muslim in Assam

Year	Muslim Population (%)	Non-Muslim Population (%)
1901	12.40%	87.60%
1951	24.68%	75.32%
1971	24.56%	75.44%
2001	30.92%	69.08%
2011	34.22%	65.78%

Source: *Population census data form Census commission of India (1901 to 2011)*

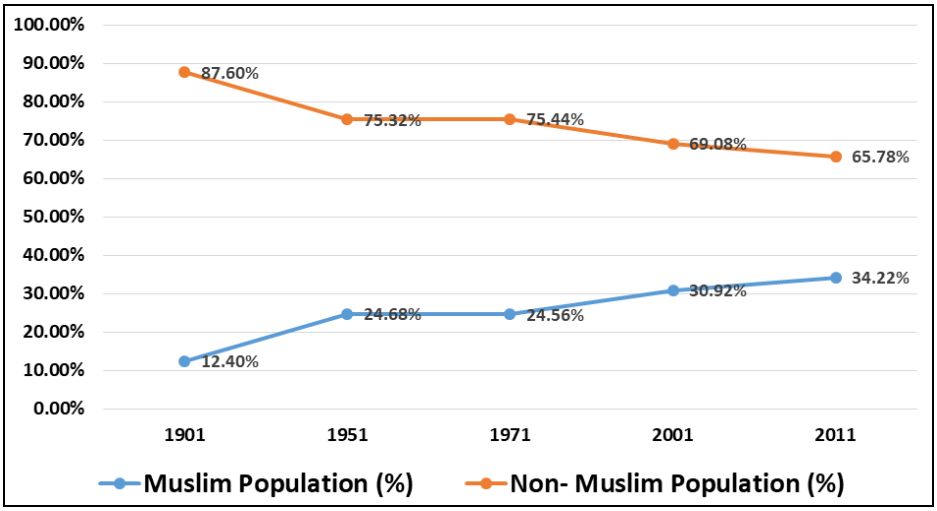


Fig 2: Percentage of Population Growth

Between 1951 and 1971, the Muslim population share shifted only slightly, moving from 24.68% to 24.56%, while the non-Muslim share correspondingly increased from 75.32% to 75.44%. Subsequently, the Muslim share rose from 24.56% in 1971 to 30.92% in 2001, while the non-Muslim share fell from 75.44% to 69.08%. Between 2001 and 2011, the Muslim share further increased from 30.92% to 34.22%, whereas the non-Muslim share decreased from 69.08% to 65.78%. Across the entire period examined, the Muslim population share increased by 21.82 percentage points (from 12.40% to 34.22%), with the non-Muslim share decreasing by the exact same margin (from 87.60% to 65.78%).

7. The "D" Voter Issues of Assam

The introduction of the "D" (Doubtful) Voter category in 1997 and the update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC)—which was finalized in 2019 and excluded 1,906,657 individuals—have brought critical administrative challenges to light: Official data spanning 1985 to 2005 indicates that out of 112,791 referred "D" voter cases, only 21.30% were successfully resolved, leaving 78.70% pending. Furthermore, only 11.39% of the resolved cases resulted in individuals being formally declared as foreigners, and a mere 12.04% of those declared were ultimately deported.

8. Status of the draft and final list of NRC in Assam:

The draft NRC published on 30 July 2018 included about 2.89 crore people, while 40.07 lakh were not included at that stage: 37.59 lakh were rejected and 2.48 lakh were placed on hold. The final NRC, published on 31 August 2019, included more than 3.10 crore people, reported as about 94% of applicants, and excluded more than 19 lakhs, or approximately 6%.

Table 3: Reported NRC stages and outcomes.

Stage	Included	Not Included / Observation
Draft list, 30 July 2018	About 2.89 crore	40.07 lakh: 37.59 lakh rejected and 2.48 lakh on hold.
Final NRC, 31 August 2019	Over 3.10 crore (about 94%)	Over 19 lakh (about 6%) excluded, according to the source.

Sources: *NRC Updating official web sides*

The distinction between exclusion from the NRC and a final legal finding of foreign nationality is crucial. A register merely records the result of a particular administrative process; a person's status and available remedies depend on applicable laws and established review procedures. The source paper itself notes that documentation failures affected exclusions and that legal recourse remains important. The final draft NRC also provides approximate community figures of 11 lakh Bengali Hindus and 7 lakh Muslims, with the remaining individuals belonging to local tribes and other ethnic groups.

9. Major Findings

- Assam's absolute population expanded from 32.90 lakh in 1901 to 312.05 lakh in 2011. Decadal growth peaked at 34.98% in 1961 and 34.95% in 1971 before moderating to 17.07% by 2011.
- The Muslim population share increased from 12.40% in 1901 to 34.22% in 2011, while the non-Muslim share declined from 87.60% to 65.78%.
- The Muslim share of Assam's population is reported to have risen from 12.40 per cent in 1901 to 34.22 per cent in 2011, while the non-Muslim share declined correspondingly. The selected observations do not establish the causes of this compositional change.
- Although the Muslim Total Fertility Rate (TFR) remains higher than the Hindu TFR, it experienced a steady downward trajectory; dropping from 5.1 in 2001 to 3.1 in 2011, driven by expanding socio-economic awareness.
- The religious-composition table does not establish citizenship status, country of origin or the number of undocumented migrants. Religion cannot be used as a substitute for individual citizenship evidence.
- The supplied paper reports a high pendency rate in 'D' Voter cases for 1985–2005: 78.70 per cent of 112,791 referred cases remained pending. This indicates serious concerns about timely case processing in the period covered.
- The 2018 draft and the 2019 final list produced distinct inclusion figures. Reports indicate that over 19 lakh people were excluded from the final list, including approximately 11 lakh Bengali Hindus and 7 lakh Muslims.
- Frameworks identifying undocumented immigrants, such as Foreigners' Tribunals, suffer from severe case pendency (78.7%), arbitrary police filings lacking adequate field verification, and extremely low ultimate deportation rates.
- The data support the need for more transparent, timely and accountable citizenship-related administration, including clear communication, accessible records, legal assistance and effective review mechanisms.
- Development and protection of indigenous rights should not depend on treating an entire religious or linguistic community as suspect.

10. Suggestions and Policy Implementation

- Expand educational programmes for women in remote and char areas, addressing child marriage and fertility through socio-economic awareness.
- Improve Foreigners' Tribunals and related police processes by reducing backlogs, ensuring adequate field verification, and providing sufficient staff, training, translation and digital case-management support.
- Make NRC and 'D' Voter procedures transparent, evidence-based and time-bound. Provide accessible, independent appeals and fair hearings; a pending case or omission from a draft list must not itself establish foreigner status.
- Publish a regularly updated demographic dashboard and annual report using official datasets, with clear definitions, reference periods and revision notes. Protect privacy and prevent unsupported conclusions about individuals from community-level statistics.
- Implement protections for indigenous and tribal communities, including applicable land safeguards and measures to preserve language and culture.
- Public communication should distinguish verified facts from allegations and avoid language that targets religious, linguistic or ethnic groups.
- Ensure that any removal or deportation action follows a final legal process, identity confirmation, applicable safeguards and the procedures required by law. Do not equate administrative exclusion with deportation.
- Implement existing constitutional, statutory and administrative protections for indigenous and tribal communities, including applicable land protections, safeguards in autonomous and protected areas, and measures for preservation of language and culture.
- Promote responsible public communication. Government agencies and public representatives should distinguish verified facts from allegations and avoid language that stigmatizes entire religious, linguistic or ethnic groups.

11. Conclusion

The immigration and population dynamics of Assam represent a complex intersection of historical legacy, socio-economic backwardness, and demographic evolution. The comparative analysis between Muslim and non-Muslim communities highlights significant shifts in demographic shares over the past century. While cross-border migration has historically shaped the state's socio-political landscape, contemporary growth rates are increasingly governed by internal variables, such as fertility differentials and maternal literacy levels. Addressing these deep-seated challenges requires a balanced approach that pairs strict, transparent legal enforcement with grassroots socio-economic development, female empowerment, and educational reform to secure a stable and harmonious demographic future for Assam.

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