

Rubel Molla**MIGRATION INTO ASSAM: SECURITIZATION AND BEYOND****Abstract**

Migration into Assam has long been a debated issue due to cross-border family ties and seen by aboriginal Assamese as a threat to the fabric of the Assamese society. The ‘rhetoric’ of recovering Mother Assam’s lost sanctity by deporting all ‘illegal’ migrants is a key focus of politics in Assam. On 31st August 2019, the government of India had published the final list of National Register of Citizens (NRC) which excluded about 1.9 million people out of the list, effectively making them stateless. Migration into Assam is historical and this paper argues that this historical movement of the people to Assam has led to the socio-political and economic changes in the course of time which brought the issue of securitization in the forefront and the NRC is the outcome of that securitization. The paper highlights the historical evolution of the migration into Assam and the securitization debates in this regard. Moreover, the contemporary political and social debates are also analyzed to understand the socio-economic and political consequences of this securitization.

Keywords: Migration, Securitization, National Register of Citizens, Assam

1. Introduction

The issue of migration has drawn fresh attention again through the recent debate over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam of India. The issue has been securitized from different angles and obviously, securitization has brought the politics in. The NRC has created concerns among the people who have been dropped. Geographically, Assam is located in north-eastern part of India. The cross-border migration in Assam had been in place for centuries. The movement of Bengali inhabitants, largely Muslims, into north-eastern part of India is a phenomenon which dates back to the 19th century. The ‘demand and supply’ of labour played a significant role behind the population movement. Consequently, Assam has experienced diverse population streams since the colonial¹ period. Colonial policies, economic impulses, natural calamities and diseases, cultural similarities, employment opportunities, etc., motivated people to move to Assam. Partition of India and the Liberation War of Bangladesh also pushed people to migrate to Assam. It is argued that the

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¹ Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan*, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1951.

heterogeneity in socio-demographic fabric had facilitated migration across the eastern and north-eastern regions of the Indian sub-continent. And it had become more complicated with the establishment of narratives in line with identity politics within the Assamese society. The main objective of updating the NRC list is to address the issue of migrants and to determine the citizenship who has applied for inclusion. On 30 July 2018, the final draft of the NRC was published which excluded more than four million people out of the list, keeping them on the verge of losing their citizenship. Later, on 31 August 2019, the final NRC list was released where about 1.9 million people were left out of the list² effectively making them stateless.

Securitization of migration from different angles had created ground and pushed for updating the NRC and sort out the people who migrated there from the neighbouring countries. Securitization has brought much attention to the issue and helped to mobilize resources and extraordinary means to solve a perceived or potential problem. NRC in Assam is an example of such an extraordinary means. Now, it is crucial to understand the debates encircling the NRC issue, the dimensions of securitization and how the issue is securitized and Migration always has demographic, economic, linguistic and cultural impacts on the host country. In Assam, it is accused that migrants had brought significant changes in the socio-cultural scenario of the state. They are creating economic burden and pressure on resources, bringing linguistic imbalances and changing the ethnic and cultural identity. NRC is an official register containing the names of Indian citizens. Its main purpose is to address the issue of 'illegal migrants' to determine citizenship. But enormous debates sparked when the final list of the NRC had been published and it is criticized strongly. Amid the debates, confusion raised whether it would put a bitter equation in the bilateral relations of the two close neighbours, Bangladesh and India. Nevertheless, the bilateral relationship between the countries has reached a new height in the past decade and has been passing through an excellent and highest level of understanding. Although, sometimes call for deporting those people who had dropped from the NRC list, comes from the political gatherings, Bangladesh government has declared the issue as the internal matter of India while India also assured Bangladesh regarding it.

This paper is an attempt to find out the answers to the questions raised above. It tries to find the relations between human migration and securitization which led the political authority to update NRC in Assam. It argues that NRC is an extraordinary resort to introduce migration as a threat to the fabric of the Assamese society and politics. The paper is based on secondary sources of information, i.e., academic journals, books, newspaper articles and reports. This paper is divided

² "1.9 m people left off Assam NRC list", *The Daily Star*, 31 August 2019.

into six sections. Following the introduction, section two sheds light on the history of migration to Assam. The third section discusses the impacts of migration and different dimensions of securitization. The fourth section explains the NRC. The fifth section deals with recent debates raised from the NRC and the sixth section concludes the paper.

2. History of Migration into Assam

The Indian state of Assam is located in the north-eastern part of the country. It is bounded to the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, to the east by Nagaland and Manipur, to the south by Mizoram and Tripura and to the west by Bangladesh, Meghalaya and West Bengal. Assam has an area of 78,523 square kilometres (km) and a population of 31,205,576.³ The economy of Assam is largely depended on agriculture. It is globally renowned for the production of tea. Its business sector has developed due to the production of silk and tea. These sectors enjoy huge investment. It has also earned a larger portion of revenue from these sectors. The development of tea industry and migration in Assam has historical connection. The following map shows the geographical position of Assam and its neighbours.

³ Population Census 2011.

Map 1: Assam and its Neighbours⁴



Historically, like other rivers, the river Brahmaputra also experienced a continuous process of human movement and settlement along its bank. The fertile valley largely attracted people from nearby hilly regions, settlers from the Indo-Gangetic plains and central and Southeast Asia whether it be Tibeto-Burmese migrants, the Tai-Ahom or other tribes. In 1128 AD, the first recorded migration occurred in Assam when the Ahom came to Assam from Siam (Thailand). During the Ahom rule in the 17th century, this region was under the invasion of Muslims,

⁴ Available at www.mapsofindia.com, accessed on 22 December 2019.

later many of them stayed back and became an important part of the indigenous people.⁵ The history of the Brahmaputra valley contains the story of a continuing process of assimilation of races and cultures of the fertile banks of the Red River.⁶ The people constituted distinct ethnic groups and spoke different languages making great variations in cultures.⁷ The state was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency in 1838 after the victory of the East India Company in Assam at the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826).⁸ The annexation of Brahmaputra valley by the British through the Treaty of Yandabo, signed on 24 February 1826, was a key point in the history of Assam. The British Assam included, apart from the Brahmaputra valley, the Assam proper, the tribal districts of Naga hills, the Mikir and the North Kachar Hills, the Khasia and Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills and the three Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet, Kachar and Goalpara. Thus, it got, racially, a composite one and politically, of heterogeneous character.⁹ After the Battle of Plassey, many Bengali Muslims fled to the north-eastern part of the Indian sub-continent to escape political persecution by the rulers of the East India Company.¹⁰ The Bengal partition and the creation of Assam and East Bengal province in 1905 due to the colonial ‘divide and rule policy’ played an important role behind the human migration to Assam.¹¹

⁵ Hari Prasanna Das, “The Problem of Immigration in Assam: A Geographical Review and Interpretation”, in Professor Hariprasanna Das life and works, Guwahati: North-East India Geographical Society, 2005, pp. 79-94.

⁶ Nirmal Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion*, New Delhi: Lancers Publishers, 1981, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

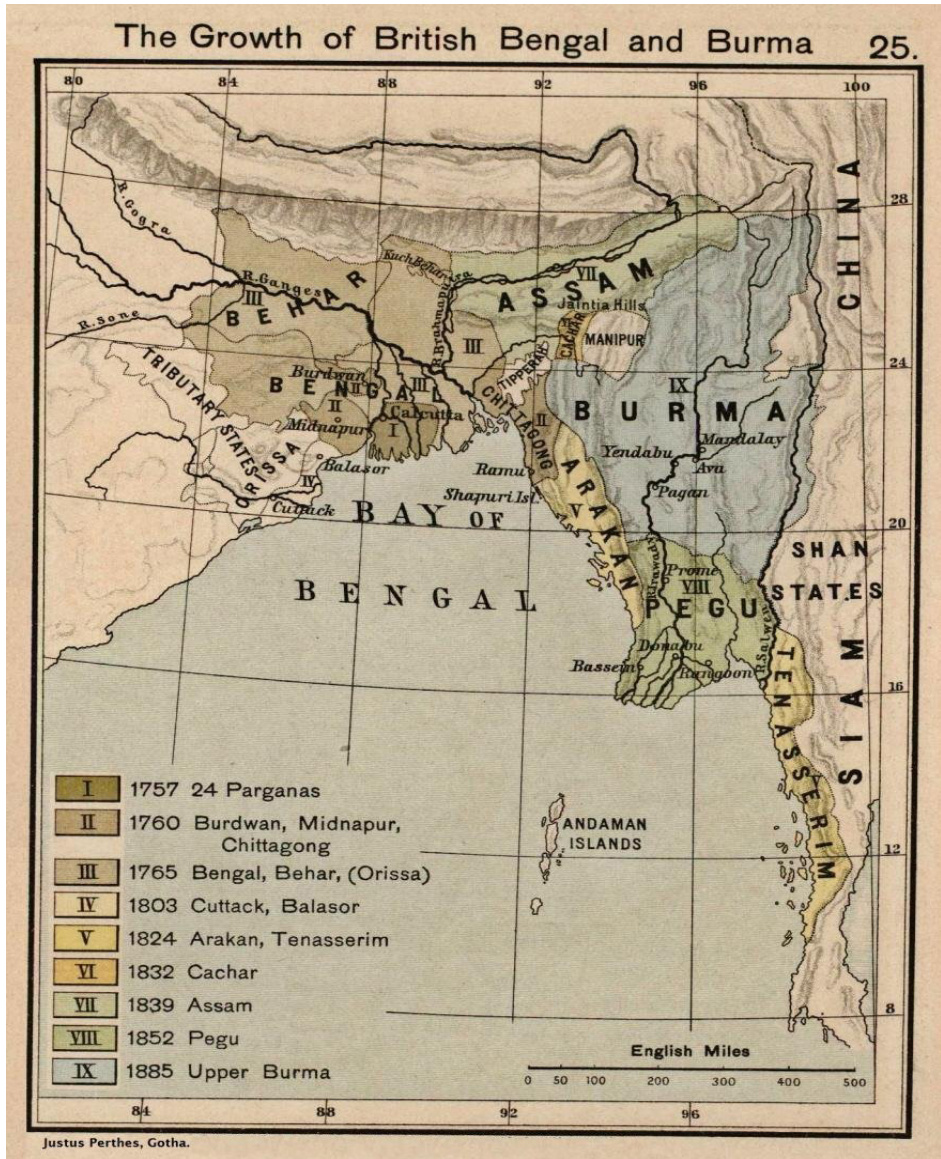
⁸ Sanghamitra Sarma, “Reflections on the Politics of Immigration Problem in Assam: A Historical Perspective”, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 19, No. 11, 2014, p. 39.

⁹ K. K. Bhattacharjee, *North-East India: A Study*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1983, p. 17.

¹⁰ Syed Nesar Ahmad, *Origin of Muslim Consciousness in India*, London: Greenwood Press, 2004.

¹¹ Ashfaque Hossain, “Three Bengali Districts and the Making and Unmaking of Assam-Bengal Borders, 1874-1947”, in Akmal Hussain (ed), *Bangladesh’s Neighbours in Indian Northeast: Exploring Opportunities and Mutual Interest*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2017, p. 184.

Map 2: Bengal and Assam under the British Rule¹²



In the undivided India, inter-state migration was usual because both Assam and East Bengal were legitimate parts of it.¹³ There were various reasons behind the large-

¹² Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21694254>, accessed on 24 December 2019.

¹³ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, "Factors Leading to the Migration from East Bengal to Assam 1872-1971", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 66, 2005-2006, p. 1012.

scale migration which were created either by Assam itself or by East Bengal as well as the British ruler of India (push-pull impacts). Firstly, uncultivated fertile wastelands of Assam always attracted the outsiders. The Government of Assam encouraged inter-state migration of peasants from East Bengal for agricultural development, especially for jute cultivation.¹⁴ During the famine of 1942-1943, 'Grow More Food' project was launched to tackle the food shortage which invited peasants from East Bengal to come to Assam to settle permanently and accelerate the production of crops.¹⁵ Secondly, Bengali peasants were always oppressed by the Zamindars. They had to pay heavy taxes which added an extra burden to their poor economic conditions. For example, Zamindars used to collect twenty-two types of taxes from the peasants.¹⁶ To get rid of the oppressions of the Zamindars, poor peasants moved to Assam. Thirdly, another cause of migration was revenue collection. The revenue that the British government collected from the Assamese people was insufficient to meet the expenditure of the government. To maximize the revenue, the British government allowed peasants from the Bengal who were highly skilled in various cultivation like jute, paddy and wheat, etc., to Assam through providing incentives.¹⁷ Fourthly, a new scope for inter-state migration was created through the development of railway communication between East Bengal and Assam. In 1892, Assam Bengal Railway Company made a 556 km railway route between Chattoogram and Dibrugarh.¹⁸ This railway communication eased the movement of poor peasants of East Bengal towards Assam to find a new settlement. Fifthly, natural calamities like famine and diseases in Bengal compelled Bengalis to move towards Assam. During the 19th century, East Bengal experienced great famines (famines of 1893, 1897 and 1898) and famine in 1915 followed by huge loss of life. These famines threatened the existence of poor people. A large number of people moved towards Assam to get rid of the famine.¹⁹ Besides the economic distress throughout the 19th Century, another reason for migration was dropping the number of Assamese people. That was due to the loss of lives of Ahom people for various diseases and epidemic like black fever, malaria cholera, etc., the Civil War during the Ahom Monarchy, Burmese wars (Burmese abducted a large number of Assamese while retreating after the defeat to British together²⁰) and later occupations and misrule of Assam.²¹ Moreover, the devastating earthquake of 1897 which destroyed both lives

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 1011.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *The Sociological Essays: Utilitarian and Positivism in Bengal*, translated and edited by S. N. Mukherjee and Maddern Marian, Calcutta: RDDHI India, 1986, pp. 128-130. Also see, Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, op. cit., p. 1003.

¹⁷ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, op. cit., p. 1013.

¹⁸ Shyam Bhadra Medhi, *Transport System and Economic Development in Assam*, Assam: Publication Board, 1978, pp. 70-72.

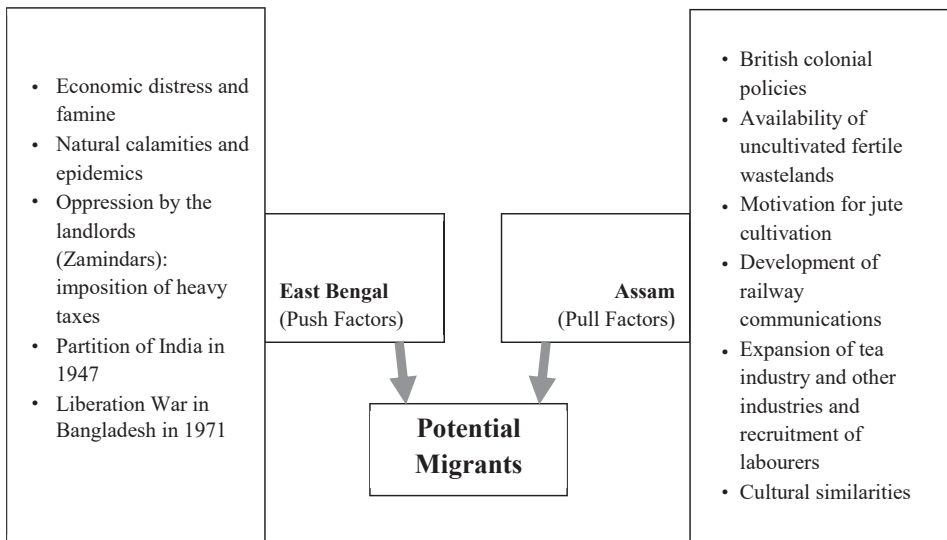
¹⁹ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, op. cit., p. 1010.

²⁰ Anindita Dasgupta, "Emergence of a Community: The Muslims of East Bengal Origin in Assam in Colonial and Post-Colonial Period", Unpublished PhD thesis, Gauhati University, 2000, p. 142.

²¹ Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom and Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*,

and farmlands²² stimulated British Government to bring and settle a portion of East Bengali in Assam.²³ Sixthly, one of the important reasons for migration to Assam was cultural similarities between the people of East Bengal and Assam. Since the southern part of Assam was under the control of Bengal for several hundred years, the number of Bengali speaking people were larger than the Assamese speakers.²⁴ Thus, similarities in language, tradition and behaviour motivated the Bengali people to move towards lower Assam and made it their homeland.²⁵ The following figure illustrates the push and pull factors of migration to Assam.

Figure 1: Push-Pull Factors of Migration to Assam²⁶



Moreover, migrants were recruited as general labours in the administration or in plantations and other complementary services of East India Company.²⁷ According to Nirmal Nibedon, the British could not wholly trust Ahoms as they considered them not fit into the Anglo-Mughal structure of the British administration for not keeping recordings of the tasks.²⁸ Again, in the 1820s, Bengalis were employed in great numbers in Assam’s bureaucracy because of their superior knowledge of

New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1947, p. 37.

²² Anindita Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 142.

²³ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, op. cit., p. 1010.

²⁴ Ismail Hussain, *Asamar Jatiya Jiban Aaru Asamiya Mussalman*, Nalbari: Anamika Granthalaya, 1997, p. 18.

²⁵ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, op. cit., p. 1010.

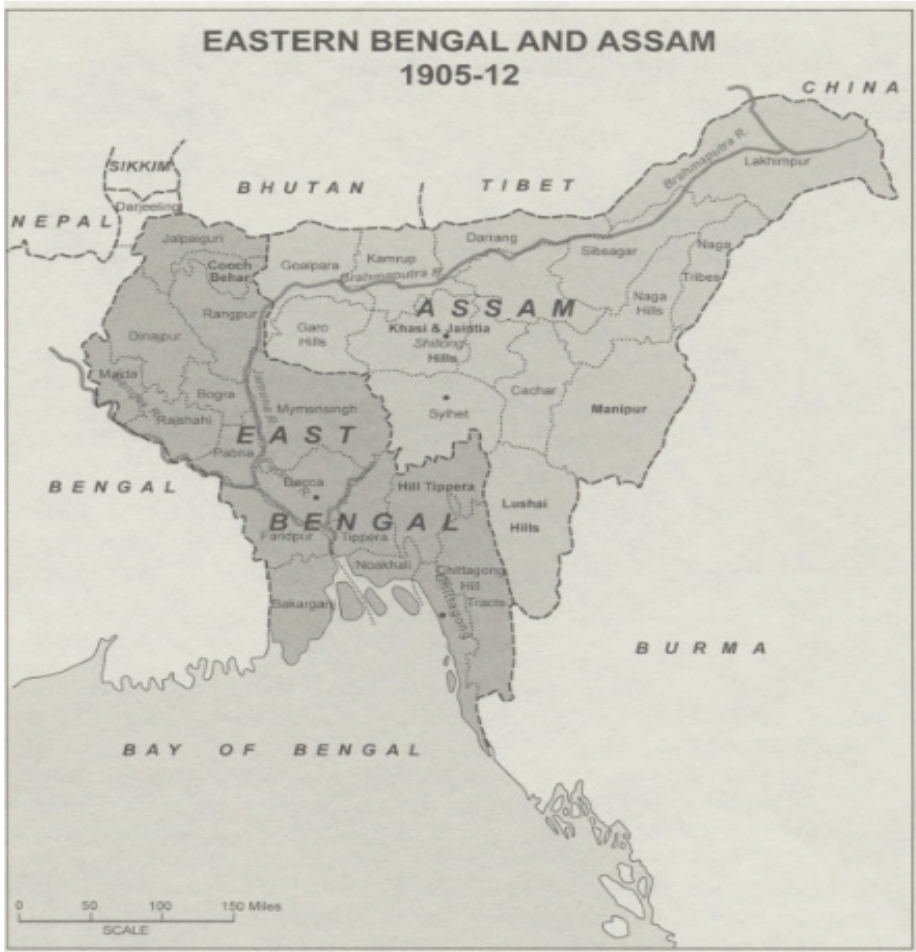
²⁶ Compiled by the author.

²⁷ R. Gopalakrishnan, “Geographical Aspects of a Crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam)”, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1986, pp. 366-381.

²⁸ Nirmal Nibedon, op. cit., p. 7.

English.²⁹ Map 3 visualizes the geographical location of East Bengal and Assam between 1905 to 1912.

Map 3: East Bengal and Assam³⁰



In general, the British administration largely encouraged an ordered system of labour recruitment for the expansion of the industries. The colonial administration also provided different jobs to the migrants as clerks in the administration. Furthermore,

²⁹ Prabhaskar K Dutta, “Assam NRC: Why BJP is upset and protesting over its own agenda”, *India Today*, 03 September 2019.

³⁰ Iftakhar Iqbal, “The Space between Nation and Empire: The Making and Unmaking of Eastern Bengal and Assam Province, 1905-1911”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2015, p. 70.

migrants also availed other professions such as teachers, lawyers, railway officers, etc.³¹ Thus, people from the districts of Sylhet, Rangpur, Mymensingh, etc., were pushed or pulled towards Assam and they cleared wastelands and jungles and, settled in various districts like Goalpara, Nagaon, Kamrup and Darang. This history of human movement across and beyond the Bengal delta testifies that there was widespread mobility before partition which has had huge implications in shaping and reshaping the history of the region.³²

The partition of India in 1947 based on ‘two-nation’ theory led further human movement. Riots between Hindus and Muslims following the partition and sporadic violence also ushered continuous migration of minority groups to Assam, more specifically to Kachar and West Bengal of India from East Pakistan (especially from Sylhet) because of geographic proximity. Sylhet was a part of colonial Assam but became a part of East Pakistan after the partition of India. As a result, a large number of minorities left this part.³³ India-Pakistan war in 1965 and pogroms taken by Pakistan in the late 1960s pushed huge number of minorities to move to India.³⁴ Assam and West Bengal became reasonable destination to the migrants because of its immediate nearness, cultural similarities and linguistic homogeneity. The following map shows the districts of Assam.

³¹ Nandana Dutta, *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2012, p. 166.

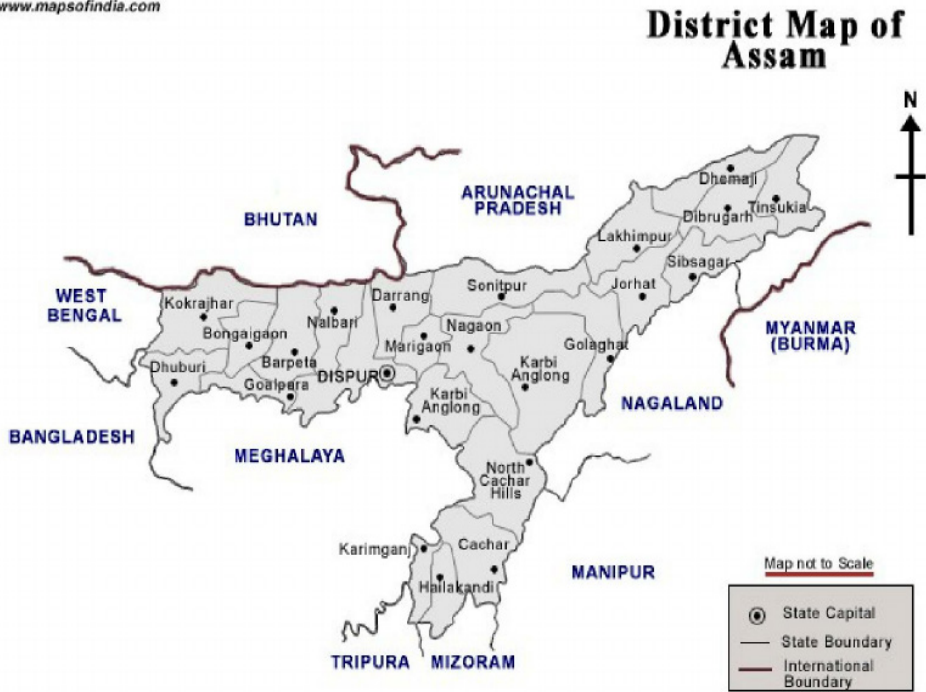
³² Ibid.

³³ Hiranya K. Nath, “Illegal Migration into Assam: Magnitude, Causes, and Economic Consequences”, SHSU Economics & International Business, Working Paper No. 10, December 2010, p. 10.

³⁴ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage: Border Crossing, Imagined Homelands, India’s East and Bangladesh*, India: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 30.

Map 4: District Map of Assam³⁵

www.mapsofindia.com



Assamese society is constituted of different religious and cultural groups. This results in growing tendencies of struggle for power among various socio-demographic groups and triggered several armed conflicts between the local migrant groups and indigenous Assamese (Boro) people. “Banal Kheda” movements of the 1970s and 1980s can be one of the best examples. As Sengupta mentioned:

“...importantly, demographic changes in Assam are increasingly contending hegemonies, coexistence of pan-Indian nationalism and regionalism, community consciousness, language standardization, synchronizations, politicizations, disintegrations, securitizations and so on...”³⁶

Moreover, due to unnatural partition, porous borders, floods and lack of economic opportunities, during the 1960s, thousands of people (mostly Hindus) from the then East Pakistan moved to India’s north-eastern region. As there is hardly

³⁵ V. P. Sharma and Vas Dev, “Prospects of Malaria Control in Northeastern India with Particular Reference to Assam”, available at https://www.researchgate.net/figure/District-map-of-Assam_fig1_242209612, accessed on 27 March 2020.

³⁶ M. Sengupta, “Historiography of the Formation of Assamese Identity: A Review”, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol. 2, No. 1 & 2, 2006, p. 123.

any consensus on the nature and magnitude of such human movement or migration, debate on the migrant issue has been complicated more since 2010. Huge debates have been raised when the Indian government made National Register of Citizens (NRC) in February 2018 to deport illegal migrants. Primarily, about 4 million people were detected as illegal migrants through the draft NRC list.³⁷ Finally, 1.9 million were detected as illegal in August 2019.³⁸ However, an attempt was also made by the government to solve the migration problem earlier. In 1985, the Assam Accord was signed between the Centre, the Assam government, All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) to end the agitation over the foreigners.³⁹ According to the Accord, immigrants who arrived before 01 January 1966, are recognized as citizens; immigrants who arrived between January 1966 and 25 March 1971, fall under the Foreigners Act (Indian National Law), must register themselves in district offices, and will not be able to vote until 10 years after their registration and immigrants who arrived after 1971 will be identified, removed from voting rolls and deported.⁴⁰ Besides introducing these instruments to stop migration, strong anti-migration sentiment within the Assamese society has grown. As a result, the issue of migration in Assam has been securitized from different angles to garner and shape the mass opinion. The following section will discuss the different dimensions of securitization of the issue in Assam.

3. Impacts of Migration in Assam and Dimensions of Securitization

The theory of securitization was developed in Europe after the end of Cold War. It stressed on providing less priority to security and more priority to politics. It also tried to focus the activities (which had been done under the banner of national security) that were problematic in light of democracy in the 1980s.⁴¹ Simply, securitization is a process-oriented conception of security. In International Relations, securitization means a process by which actors transform subjects into matter of security. It is, according to Barry Buzan et al., “an extreme version of politicization that enables extraordinary means to be used in the name of security”.⁴²

³⁷ “Assam register: Four million risk losing India citizenship”, *BBC*, 30 July 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45002549>, accessed on 12 June 2019.

³⁸ “Assam NRC: What next for 1.9 million ‘stateless’ Indians?”, *BBC News*, 31 August 2019.

³⁹ “From Assam Accord to NRC discord: A timeline”, *The Economic Times*, 02 August 2018.

⁴⁰ Arpita Bhattacharyya, “Understanding the Historical Conflicts Behind Today’s Violence in Assam”, Center for American Progress, 29 August 2012, p. 3.

⁴¹ Jef Huysmans, *Security Unbound: Enacting Democratic Limits*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

⁴² Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 25.

There are debates regarding the necessity of securitization. Scholars argue that security is always the most important factor in shaping foreign policy.⁴³ It portrays national security as the careful design done by the politicians and decision makers, not a natural happening. Securitization brings a clear understanding that:

“political issues are constituted as extreme security issues to be dealt with urgently when they have been labelled as ‘dangerous’, ‘menacing’, ‘threatening’, ‘alarming’ and so on by a ‘securitising actor’ who has the social and institutional power to move the issue ‘beyond politics’.”⁴⁴

For example, shaping immigration as a potential threat to national security redirects immigration to a big priority issue from a low priority political concern that necessitates multiple actions, i.e., securing borders. Securitization highlights the subject which ultimately receives much attention and resources compared to the subjects that have not been securitized, even though they cause more harm or loss. Moreover, it is possible to legitimize any extraordinary means to solve a perceived or potential problem after being securitized successfully. This extraordinary means may include a state of emergency or martial law, mobilizing the military and institutional procedures or acts.

The securitization process comprises of four components—actors, existential threat, referent object and audience. Securitizing actor means who initiates the move or statement to securitize where existential threat is an object or ideal that is defined as potentially harmful. An object or ideal which is under threat and requires to be protected is called the referent object. The concept of speech act was brought into the securitization process by the Copenhagen School. They have broadened the paradigm of security largely. According to this school, the speech act is an utterance which represents and recognizes phenomena or issues as security, thus providing it special status and legitimizing extraordinary measures.⁴⁵ According to this understanding, utterance itself is the act.

Securitization theory generally emphasizes on five dimensions—economic, societal, political and environmental sectors. A specific threat is pronounced as threatening a referent object for example, in the case of societal sector, the referent object is identity, again, the ecosystem and endangered species are the referent objects in the case of environmental sector.⁴⁶ State is the referent object in the military sector.

⁴³ Göktürk Tüysüzoglu, “How demand for security influence the shaping of foreign policy: Using the theory of securitisation to understand Armenia–Iran relations”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 5, No.2, 2014, p. 192.

⁴⁴ Clara Eroukhmanoff, “Securitisation Theory”, in Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Christian Scheinpluf (eds.), *International Relations Theory*, Bristol, England: E-International Publishing, 2017, p. 104.

⁴⁵ Barry Buzan et al., op. cit., p. 26.

⁴⁶ Clara Eroukhmanoff, op. cit., p. 105.

Categorizing security in different sectors helps to focus on the contextual nature of security and threats. It clarifies that existential threats are not objective but related to the different features of each referent object. By talking about the referent objects, it tries to find the answers to some basic questions: security by whom, security from what and security for whom.⁴⁷

Migration is a historical phenomenon and it is evolving with the world's history. Since the modern world is passing through several complexities, like the rise of populism, climate change, human migration and ultra-nationalism, securitization has been received as a shield to handle those complexities which has greater implications (both positive and negative). Hazarika found it as:

“..... people move internally, within nations externally, to other countries, even to poor and underdeveloped lands, which hold out some promise of a living. This puts pressure on the host communities, more so if they are already poor, fearing marginalisation by the new, hardworking and mobile settlers. Often, this in turn, leads to a backlash against the immigrant”⁴⁸

The migration in Assam has been securitized from different dimensions, i.e., demography, economy, language and religion. It is argued that migration has created tensions in social, political and economic fields because of their heterogeneous and diverse religion, language, caste and culture. Hence, they had brought significant change in the socio-cultural scenario of the state.⁴⁹ According to Nibedon, there had been language riots in Assam due to pan-Bengali movement; pressure on economy reduced the size of reserved tribal blocks, forest resources reduced due to cutting of trees and occupation of the area by the foreigners. Besides, identity of tribal people is on the verge of extinction.⁵⁰ The call for securitization of the issue can be found from the following opinion of Sinam Prakash, Secretary General of the North Eastern Students Organization (NESO) chapter of Manipur. He said, “It’s not just the issue of Assam but an issue of the entire north-east—we are not the dumping ground for illegal immigrants. Our identities, languages and cultures have been threatened.”⁵¹ The following sub-sections discuss the impacts of migration in the Assamese society and different aspects of securitization.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sanjoy Hazarika, op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁹ Bishwajit Sonowal, “Immigration in Assam during Colonial rule: Its Impact on the Socio- Economic and Demography of Assam”, *International Journal of Innovative Studies in Sociology and Humanities (IJISSH)*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2018, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Nirmal Nibedon, op. cit., pp. 112-114.

⁵¹ Pallab Bhattacharya, “Can religion decide Indian citizenship?” *The Daily Star*, 04 December 2018.

3.1 *Economic Implication*

Migration always has both positive and negative economic implications for the host nation. Goswami identifies unauthorized immigrants as the major cause of retardation of progress in economy.⁵² But historically, migrant labourers played a vital role in Assam's economy. Industrialization and development of agriculture were conducive to the overall economic growth of the colonial Assam.⁵³ The agricultural sector benefitted largely from the migrants' labourers. They introduced multiple crop systems in the same land and supplied cheap labour which ultimately contributed to effective usage of land for cultivation. Among the migrants, there were different professional workers like small trade owners, boatmen, masons, khalasis of mail, carters, cobblers, fishermen, etc. That time, Marwaris almost captured the whole trade and commerce of the province and the immigrants became dominant in the entire economic sector.⁵⁴ The frequent conflict between local people and immigrants broke out due to the occupation of char lands, grazing lands and wastelands in the areas settled by the local people.⁵⁵ This led to a new concern among the Assamese. It is criticized that migrants are putting huge burden on land and depletion in common property resources. Fears floating in Assamese society that migrants are displacing the native workers and snatching jobs which ultimately causing the reduction in wages for the locals.⁵⁶ Critics claim that immigration has increased the financial burden to the state government by increasing expenditure on education and health facilities to the immigrants.⁵⁷ Thus, immigration into Assam has been visualizing as an economic burden to the local Assamese which has strengthened the demand of seeking extraordinary means to stop immigration into Assam.

3.2 *Impacts on Ethno-Demographic Scenario*

Migration is portraying as a threat to the fabric of Assam's demographic composition. The Decadal growth of population (see Table 1) in Assam led political actors to conclude that such a movement of 'illegal' people must have continued throughout the history of Assam.⁵⁸ Migration is convicted for high density and they are seen as a catastrophic problem for indigenous people.

⁵² S. Goswami,

⁵³ Bishwajit Sonowal, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.13.

⁵⁶ J. Das and D. Talukdar, "Socio-Economic and Political Consequence of Illegal Migration into Assam from Bangladesh", *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2016, p. 4.

⁵⁷ J. Das and D. Talukdar, op. cit., p. 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

“The issue has attained demographic overtures in view of the spawning anxiety among indigenous people that granting citizenship to a large number of migrants would change the complexion of population and endanger their cultural identity”.⁵⁹

Critics argue that the rise of density level creates troubles in health, sanitation and housing facilities. Demographic pressure will jeopardize cultural survival and employment opportunities for the local community.⁶⁰ It is condemned that though migrants settled in Assam, most of them failed to integrate themselves with the mainstream people which often resulted in violence between Bodo and Muslim community. Table 1 shows the population growth rate of Assam from 1901 to 2011.

Table 1: Decadal Population Growth of Assam⁶¹

Period	Assam (in %)	India in (%)
1901-1911	+11.0	+5.8
1911-1921	+20.5	-0.3
1921-1931	+19.9	+11.0
1931-1941	+20.4	+14.2
1941-1951	+19.9	+13.3
1951-1961	+35.0	+21.6
1961-1971	+35.0	+24.8
1971-1981	+23.3	+24.7
1981-1991	+23.6	+23.5
1991-2001	+18.8	+21.3
2001-2011	+16.93	+17.6

3.3 *Impact on Language and Religion*

A popular concern is that Bengali migration, both Muslims and Hindus, into Assam during the British period created a linguistic imbalance. In 1836, the concern was strengthened through the declaration of Bengali as the official language and medium of instruction in schools of Assam by the British government.⁶² This spread resentment among the Assamese people which in turn led to bitter feelings between the two communities.⁶³ There remains strong contradictions regarding the multi-

⁵⁹ K.V. Thomas, “The Politics of Citizenship: The National Register for Citizens (NRC) in Assam”, *The Hindu Centre*, 06 October 2018.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ J. Das and D. Talukdar, “Socio-Economic and Political Consequence of Illegal Migration into Assam from Bangladesh”, *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2016, p. 4.

⁶² Bishwajit Sonowal, op. cit., p. 12.

⁶³ Amalendu Guha, “Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1978-80”,

ethnic composition of the Assamese society and the quest for unilingual identity.⁶⁴ There also exists fear among the Assamese of losing their own cultural and linguistic identity. This fear has been successfully mobilized by the socio-political actors as a threat which ultimately augmented resentment towards Bengalis and led to sporadic riots between the two communities, especially in the Brahmaputra valley in the years 1948, 1950, 1960, 1968, 1972 and 1980.⁶⁵ The riot was fuelled by the retaliation of Bengali speaking people against the decision to make Assamese the official language of Assam.⁶⁶ The following table illustrates the share of language in Assam.

Table 2: Share of Language in Assam⁶⁷

Languages	Population 2001	Population 2011	Share in total population 2001 (%)	Share in total population 2011 (%)	Decadal growth of population (%)
Assamese	13,010,478	15,095,797	48.80	48.38	16.03
Bengali	73,43,338	9,024,324	27.54	28.91	22.89
Hindi	15,69,662	21,01,435	5.89	6.73	33.82
Bodo	12,96,162	14,16,125	4.86	4.53	9.26

It is noted that the Assamese speaking people drastically increased from 23 per cent in 1931 to 55 per cent in 1951. Interestingly, many Muslims settled in the Brahmaputra Valley identified themselves in the post-1947 Censuses as Assamese (later became known as New Assamese) to attain a greater political and social acceptance.⁶⁸ A belief in Assam is that though Asamiya is the state language, it is only confined only to the Brahmaputra valley. On the other hand, in the Barak Valley, Bengali (Sylheti) is the dominant language and it is also found in significant numbers in the other districts of the state.⁶⁹

Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 15, No. 41-43, 1980, pp. 1699-1720.

⁶⁴ Misra, 1999.

⁶⁵ Amalendu Guha, op. cit

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Assamese speakers declining in 2001-2011”, *The Sentinel*, 29 June 2018; Sushanta Talukdar, “Census 2011 Language Data: Assam records decline in percentage of Assamese, Bodo, Rabha and Santali speakers”, *Nezine*, 28 June 2018, available at <https://nezine.com/info/bnhUV3NpcjlsUkxwVTV vkNkFhdFJKdz09/census-2011-language-data:-assam-records-decline-in-percentage-of-assamese,-bodo,-rabha-and-santali-speakers.html>, accessed on 28 September 2019.

⁶⁸ Myron Weiner, “The Political Demography of Assam’s Anti-Immigrant Movement”, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1983, pp. 279-292.

⁶⁹ Bhupen Kumar Nath and Dilip C. Nath, “The Change of Religion and Language Composition in the state of Assam in Northeast India: A Statistical Analysis since 1951 to 2001”, *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 2, No. 5, 2012, p. 4.

Religion is another area and it is argued that the growth rate of Hindus is lower than that of Muslims. The census data shows the steady growth of Muslims from 24.68 per cent of the state's population in 1951 to 28.43 per cent in 1991 and 34.22 per cent in 2011.⁷⁰ There is a looming fear among some sections of Assamese society that the 'excess' growth rate of Muslims may ultimately outnumber other religious communities.

It is claimed that the unusual high growth of Muslim and Bengali population in Assam may be due to cross-border 'illegal' Muslim migrants from Bangladesh to Assam.⁷¹ It becomes a grave concern among the Assamese that if the trends of the proportion of religious population continue like the last 30 years, then Hindu and other religions will become the minority in Assam in comparison to the combined proportion of Muslim and Christian population.⁷² The report of Srinivas Kumar Sinha, former governor of Assam, in 1998 expresses that illegal migrants threaten to reduce the Assamese people to a minority in their state.⁷³ According to the religion census 2011, Hindu is a majority religion and it forms the majority religion in 18 out of the 27 districts of Assam state. Islam is followed by majority in 9 out of 27 districts.⁷⁴ Figure 2 shows the religion-wise population in Assam.

⁷⁰ K.V. Thomas, *op. cit.*

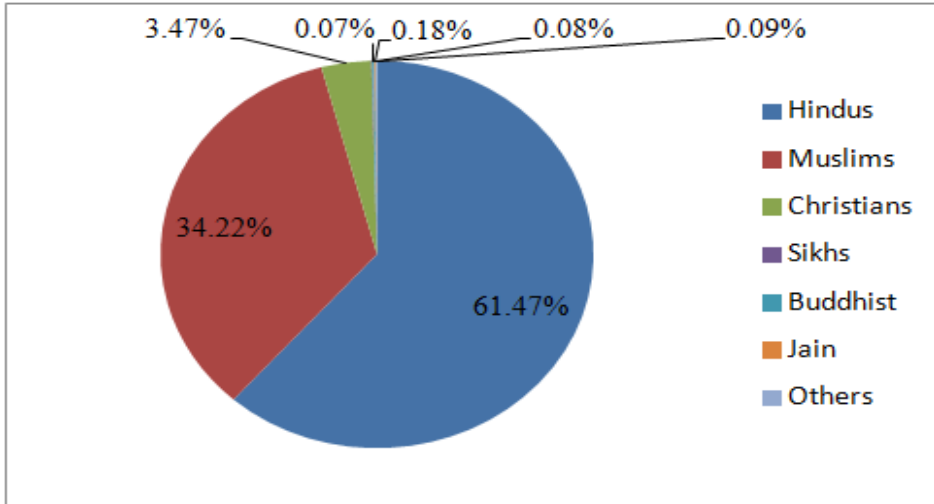
⁷¹ Bhupen Kumar Nath and Dilip C. Nath, *op. cit.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ The Governor of Assam, "Report on Illegal Migration into Assam", 08 November 1998.

⁷⁴ Muslim majority districts are - Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Darrang, Dhubri, Goalpara, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Morigaon, Nagaon. Also see, Assam Religion Census 2011, available at <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/18-assam.html>, accessed on 17 September 2019.

Figure 2: Religion-wise Population in Assam⁷⁵



In light of the above discussion, it can be said that migration to Assam has been securitized which ultimately receives much attention and resources to solve a perceived or potential problem through mobilizing institutional procedure or act as a solution tool. NRC in Assam is an example of such an instrument. The next section elaborates the NRC and its process.

4. National Register of Citizens (NRC)

The NRC is an official register containing the names of Indian citizens. The main purpose of NRC is to address the issue of illegal migrants⁷⁶ and to determine the citizenship who have applied for inclusion. To get one’s name included in the NRC, one requires some documents issued before midnight on 24 March 1971 where the name of self or ancestor appears to prove residence in Assam (see list-A of Table 3).⁷⁷ If any of the documents (list-A) is not of the applicant but that of his/her ancestors-father, grandfather or grandmother or great grandfather or great grandmother and so on, the applicant requires to submit documents listed in B of Table 3. In this case, applicant needs to submit those documents to prove the relationship with such ancestors.

⁷⁵ Assam Religion Census 2011, available at <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/18-assam.html>, accessed on 17 September 2019.

⁷⁶ “The citizenry test: Assam NRC explained”, *The Hindu*, 31 July 2018.

⁷⁷ Amit Ranjan, “Assam’s National Register of Citizenship: Background, Process and Impact of the Final Draft”, *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 306, 05 September 2018, p. 6.

In India, the first NRC was prepared in 1951, following the census of 1951. The NRC update is a process to enlist the names of those persons or their descendants whose names appear in any of the Electoral Rolls up to midnight on 24 March 1971, the 1951 NRC or any of the admissible documents stipulated.⁷⁸ This updating process is based on provisions of the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003.⁷⁹ In 2013, the updating process started under the monitoring of the Indian Supreme Court. On 31 December 2017, the draft NRC was released partly and the complete draft was published on 30 July 2018.⁸⁰ Table 3 gives an overview of the required documents for NRC.

Table 3: Required Documents for NRC⁸¹

List-A	List-B
● 1951 NRC	● Birth Certificate
● Electoral Roll(s) up to 24 th March 1971 (midnight)	● Board/University Certificate
● Citizenship Certificate	● Land document
● Land & Tenancy Records	● Circle Officer/GP Secretary Certificate in case of married women
● Permanent Residential Certificate	● Electoral Roll
● Refugee Registration Certificate	● Bank/LIC/Post Office records
● Passport	● Ration Card
● Any Government-issued License/Certificate	● Any other legally acceptable document
● Life Insurance Certificate	
● Birth Certificate	
● Board/University Educational Certificate	
● Government. Service/Employment Certificate	
● Bank/Post Office Accounts	
● Court Records/Processes	

⁷⁸ Amit Ranjan, op. cit., p. 3.

⁷⁹ Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC) Assam, Government of Assam, “What is NRC”, available at http://www.nrcassam.nic.in/wha_nrc.html, accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁸⁰ “The citizenry test: Assam NRC explained”, *The Hindu*, 31 July 2018, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/the-citizenry-test-assam-nrc-explained/article24560028.ece>, accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁸¹ Amit Ranjan, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

According to the draft released on July 2018, more than 32 million people submitted documents to the NRC to prove their citizenship, where 4 million have been dropped out from the published list.⁸² Later, on 31 August 2019, the final list of NRC was published with 1.9 million people left out.⁸³ Assam government announced that excluded people can appeal to Foreigners Tribunal (FTs) within 120 days. It also declared to set up 400 FTs to deal with the people that were left out.⁸⁴ Box 1 shows the timeline of NRC in Assam. The publication of final list in August 2019 has sparked huge debates in India. The following section discusses those debates.

Box 1: Timeline of NRC⁸⁵

1950: Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act comes into force.
1951: First-ever National Register of Citizens (NRC) of India published.
1979: Anti-foreigners’ movement started in Assam.
January 1980: All Assam Students Union (AASU) submitted the first memorandum demanding updating of NRC.
August 14, 1985: Historic Assam Accord was signed.
1990: AASU submitted modalities to update NRC to Centre as well state government.
1999: Centre took the first formal decision to update the NRC as per the Assam Accord.
May 2005: The modalities for updating the NRC were approved by the Centre in consultation with the Assam government.
July 2009: For the first time NRC matter reached the Supreme Court through an NGO called Assam Public Works.
August 2013: The petition filed by Assam Public Works came up for hearing.
December 2013: The Supreme Court directed to start the updating process of NRC.
February 2015: Updating of NRC process had begun.
December 31, 2017: The government published the first draft of the NRC.
July 30, 2018: Assam government released second NRC draft. Of the 32.9 million who applied, 28.9 million were declared genuine citizens. The draft NRC excluded over 4 million people.
August 01, 2018: The Supreme Court ruled that the Assam NRC was only a draft and hence it cannot be the basis of any action.
August 17, 2018: The Supreme Court asked the Assam NRC coordinator to submit the data of district-wise percentage of the population excluded from the NRC draft in the state.
July 30, 2018: Another Draft NRC published; 4 million of 32 million people were excluded.
June 26, 2019: Publication of Additional Draft Exclusion List of 102,462 released.
August 31, 2019: The government released the final version of the NRC, with over 1.9 million people in Assam left out from the list.

⁸² “Assam register: Four million risk losing India citizenship”, op. cit.

⁸³ Bikash Singh, “Those left out of NRC will know reasons next month”, *The Economic Times*, 21 October 2019.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ “NRC timeline through the years”, *The Economic Times*, 31 August 2019.

5. Contemporary Debates

The publication of the final NRC received severe criticisms from political oppositions, civil society and minority groups. Even, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sought to review the list and claimed that many Hindus left out of the NRC.⁸⁶ Assam's BJP leader and Cabinet Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma claimed that "many undeserving names were included because of manipulation of legacy data".⁸⁷ Trinamool Congress (TMC) criticized NRC as the plan of the BJP government to drive out Bengalis from the north-eastern state.⁸⁸ The Communist Party of India (Marxist) accused that many Indian citizens did not figure out and demanded a transparent process. It also raised questions about the validity of FTs as it is not a judicial body.⁸⁹ Assam's Congress leader criticized the updating of NRC as an example of erroneous implementation of the law.⁹⁰ The authenticity of the procedure and the list fall into a big question whenever newspaper reports revealed that former President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's nephew is dropped from the list.⁹¹ Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed was the fifth President (1974 to 1977) of India. Like him, many retired government employees were also excluded.⁹² Moreover, a retired Indian Army's junior commissioned officer (JCO), Md Sanaulah did not find his name, two daughters and a son on the list.⁹³ He served the Indian Army for 30 years⁹⁴ and participated in the Kargil war against Pakistan in 1999. In general, NRC has been criticized from various grounds. Though the cut-off date is midnight of the 24 March 1971, there are individuals whose ancestors came to Assam in the 1800s, they are not in the final draft list.⁹⁵ Again, there are some individuals whose ancestors' names exist in the 1951 NRC but excluded from the draft list.⁹⁶ Women who came from the Indian states of West Bengal and Bihar, and got married in Assam, their names are also missing. However, it is argued that Assam Government failed to get the proper legacy data to address the technical problem of non-inclusion.⁹⁷

⁸⁶ Prabhaskar K Dutta, op. cit.

⁸⁷ Rishiraj Bhagawati, "Final NRC list published in Assam: As Sarbananda Sonowal tries to quell panic, document draws criticism across political lines", *First Post*, 01 September 2019.

⁸⁸ "NRC final list : TMC opposes, says Centre will have to take", *Business Standard*, 31 August 2019.

⁸⁹ "NRC: BJP Reacts Tepidly, Congress, CPI (M) Urge Centre to Protect Citizens' Rights", *The Wire*, 31 August 2019.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Manogya Loiwal, "Former President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's family again left out of NRC list", *India Today*, 01 September 2019.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Ex-soldier of Kargil war declared 'foreigner' in Assam's final NRC list", *The Daily Star*, 31 August 2019.

⁹⁴ Furquan Ameen, "Retired soldier who served for 30 years in NRC cuffs in Assam", *The Telegraph*, 30 May 2019.

⁹⁵ Tora Agarwala, "Assam citizenship list: Names missing in NRC final draft, 40 lakh ask what next", *The Indian Express*, 30 July 2018.

⁹⁶ Rahul Karmakar, "NRC update: Relatives of former President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Sepoy Mutiny fighter excluded in final draft", *The Hindu*, 01 August 2018.

⁹⁷ Amit Ranjan, op. cit., p. 7.

There are always debates regarding migration that it facilitates high population growth, changes the demography, increases border fluidities and creates economic and political pressures on the host nation. From the perspective of securitization, recent debates over the NRC indicate that Assamese society is probably not willing to have assimilated or integrated at the cost of changes in the demographic, linguistic and religious composition. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has fuelled the debate over the NRC issue further. It was passed in the Parliament on 11 December 2019 followed by country-wide protests. At first, protest started in Assam and then spread quickly to other states of India followed by the reports of sporadic violence and riot in New Delhi on 23 February 2020. Some states also refused to implement the act as part of the protest. However, the protesters have common opposition to the act but their reasons for rejecting the legislation vary.⁹⁸ Firstly, NRC and CAA are opposed on the grounds it will bring systematic sectarian biases against the religious minorities.⁹⁹ Political opposition criticized the CAA arguing that it can be a facilitator to permanently depart the minorities.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, in Assam and other north-eastern states, voice raised not to allow any kind of immigrants.¹⁰¹ Their concern is that the act would motivate further migration.

Now, what is the implication of the NRC issue for Bangladesh? Is there any matter of concern for Bangladesh? Before seeking the answers, recent trends of bilateral relations between the two countries should be considered. The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India has reached new heights for the last decade and is passing through an excellent level of understanding. The relationship has been strengthened in connectivity and partnership through Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN), Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Moreover, Bangladesh has opened both seaports and land ports for India's transit. Allowing Chattogram port to use, Bangladesh has largely facilitated connectivity to the north-eastern part of India. India is a major trading partner of and the second largest source of imports for Bangladesh. Additionally, *border haats* between the two countries for easy movement of some goods bear testimony of close relationships. On the other hand, about half a million Bangladeshis visit India annually for tourism, medical treatment and shopping purposes.¹⁰² Bangladesh government has already declared the NRC issue as an internal matter of India. On 20 August 2019, during his visit to Dhaka, India's External Affairs

⁹⁸ Yasmeen Serhan, "When Is a Protest Too Late?" *The Atlantic*, 18 December 2018.

⁹⁹ Asian Human Rights Commission, available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/alrc-news/human-rights-council/hrc39/alrc-cws-39-004-2018/>, accessed on 25 June 2019.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Yasmeen Serhan, *op. cit.*

¹⁰² Kalam Shahed, "The geopolitics of National Register of Citizens in Assam", *The Daily Star*, 03 February 2019.

Minister S Jaishankar mentioned that the process of documenting and identifying illegal immigrants in Assam is India's internal matter.¹⁰³ Before the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has assured during a bilateral meeting on 28 September 2019 that there is nothing to be worried about NRC.¹⁰⁴ Bangladesh's foreign minister also termed the issue as an internal matter of India and said that the government does not see the Assam's citizenship exercise as a problem.¹⁰⁵ Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh also expressed, during a visit to India on October 2019 that Bangladesh would be careful regarding the issue.¹⁰⁶

6. Conclusion

Historically, Assam became a destination for the migrants because of various domestic and external impulses. Natural calamities and diseases, poverty and oppression of the landlords had pushed the poor peasants of the Bengal to move to Assam where British colonial policies, development of communication, availability of fertile lands, cultural affinities, employment opportunities, etc., attracted the people in the inter-state migration during the colonial period. This process of migration continued till the partition of Bengal in 1947. The partition of India in 1947 based on the 'two-nation' theory led further human movement. This history of migration implies that human migration to Assam was an inevitable outcome.

The issue of migration is considered as a major marker of Assamese politics. It has been securitized from various perspectives through both visualizing it as a threat to the ethno-demographic composition, cultural assimilation and economic advancement of Assamese society as well as necessitating the special call for specific measures to solve those problems. NRC arrived at the scene as a measure. After the publication of NRC, the debate over the migration and reasonability of NRC has been raised with comments and criticisms from the different sections of the society. The debate was fuelled further by the enactment of CAA. India also experienced a country-wide protest against the NRC and CAA with reports of sporadic violence. As Bangladesh is a close neighbour of India, it is crucial to think about the possible implications of the problem. Resolving the problem depends on how Bangladesh responds or reacts. However, Bangladesh is passing an excellent partnership and understanding with India since the last decade. It responded to the NRC issue as an internal matter of India and it has been assured of not to be tensed.

¹⁰³ "NRC in Assam India's internal matter: Jaishankar", *The Economic Times*, 20 August 2019.

¹⁰⁴ "Bangladesh has nothing to worry about NRC: Modi tells Hasina", *The Daily Star*, 28 September 2019.

¹⁰⁵ "Hasina-Modi talks in New York: Bangladesh doesn't see NRC as problem", *bdnews24.com*, available at <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2019/09/19/hasina-modi-talks-in-new-york-bangladesh-doesn-t-see-nrc-as-problem>, accessed on 25 June 2019.

¹⁰⁶ "Feni water given; wait on for Teesta", *The Daily Star*, 06 October 2019.