



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Citizenship Debate in Assam: A Historical Account of the Colonial and Post-Colonial Developments

Moses Kharbithai^{1,*}, Pinky Mishra²

¹Teaches at Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

²Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 09-07-2025

Accepted 25-08-2025

Published 24-10-2025

* Corresponding author.

Moses Kharbithai

moses.kharbithai@gmail.com

[https://doi.org/](https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v4i3.25.61)

10.53989/jcp.v4i3.25.61



ABSTRACT

The politics of citizenship debate in Assam has always been an issue of intense political and social discourse in the northeast region of India. It has manifested itself into the complex interplay of migration, identity, and the concept of belonging. With the passage of time, it has uncovered itself into the contemporary political narrative of national identity and regional autonomy. The crucial theme of this debate revolves around the question of who qualifies as a legitimate citizen of Assam and who does not, and on what grounds one qualifies, which have been influenced, to a great extent, by both colonial and post-colonial developments. Thus, to better understand this complex issue of citizenship politics, it is crucial to consider the role played by the related historical diplomacy in the origination and further continuation of the debate. This paper aims to explore how the emerging debates of citizenship politics in Assam traces back to colonialism and postcolonial times, highlighting how these two power structures have contributed to complex political scenario in the region and current citizenship narratives.

Keywords: Citizenship; Colonialism; Assam; Migration; Assam Accord; NRC; CAA

INTRODUCTION

The issue of citizenship in Assam is an extremely complex and contentious political paradigm in northeast India. The state of Assam which is part of the northeastern region of India has evolved through various identity questions along with the citizenship politics¹. The region has become a central point for debates related to migration, ethnicity, and identity. It has seen various strong and ongoing ethnic movements by small tribal groups wanting to create their own self-governing areas². What has made the debate more intricate is the growing concern regarding unsettled migration politics being entangled with the emerging multiple ethnic, linguistic and identity claims. To better comprehend this matter, it is thus crucial to examine the contextual and historical foundations of citizenship in relation to the state of Assam. The paper aims to provide nuanced understanding

on colonial and post-colonial developments of citizenship politics.

The terms ‘citizen’ and ‘citizenship’ has historical roots to ancient Greek city-states. Today, the word citizen is understood as a definition of a “person who is legally recognized as a member of a particular nation or state”. Citizenship signifies equality and integration within the political community. The term Citizenship is thus defined as “the full and equal membership in a political community”³. It implies an existing relationship between the individual and the state based on the principle of universal rights and obligations. The Constitutional framework of India governing citizenship is outlined in Part II under Articles 5 to 11 of the Constitution of India. These articles deal with the acquisition, retention, and termination, and determination of the Indian citizenship, particularly in the context of



migration between India and Pakistan. India recognizes only single citizenship, not dual citizenship. Article 5 specifies that a person can be an Indian citizen if they were born in India, migrated from Pakistan, or are descendants of such individuals. Article 6 covers the citizenship of individuals who migrated from Pakistan to India post-partition. Article 7 deals with individuals who migrated to Pakistan and later returned to India, while Article 8 concerns persons of Indian origin residing outside India and their eligibility for citizenship. Article 9 disqualifies individuals who voluntarily acquire foreign citizenship from holding Indian citizenship. Article 10 ensures the continuity of the citizenship and its protection, and Article 11 grants Parliament the authority to regulate citizenship by law (Constitution of India, 1950, Articles 5-11)³. Thus, the notion of citizenship focuses on legal and political status of individuals in the Indian state while emphasizing their equal rights and duties. However, despite the legal and constitutional provisions of citizenship, the issue of citizenship in Assam remains deeply contested. The constitutional text provides only a foundational perspective to the issue. The real complexities of the citizenship debate in the region can be better understood by examining the historical processes that began during colonial rule and continued through the post-independence era. These developments have shaped the socio-political landscape and continue to influence contemporary debates.

The state of Assam has gone through a complex and tense history determined by waves of migration. This human mobility brought with them the questions of identity, language, culture, which led to deep social and political divisions. Over time, this issue has heightened awareness of the Assamese identity in the region, which has not only reinforced cultural and linguistic pride among the local population but has also come to play as a dominant and influential role in redefining the sociopolitical dynamics of the state. The "Assamese" identity is not precisely defined, and yet it remains a subject of debate with no definitive criteria that everyone agrees upon. It is very difficult to define who truly qualifies as an Assamese. Assam is home to a diverse range of communities, thus a melting pot of diverse languages and traditions. The Assam population is a conglomerate mixture of various racial and ethnic stocks comprising of Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan, evolved through a sustained process of assimilation. Today, the state manifests diverse groups and tribes coexisting, each with its unique culture, tradition, attire and value system. The indigenous people in the state are referred to as "Asomiya"⁴. The term Assamese, thus, encompasses the people who have historically lived in the region, with a rich cultural heritage that spans centuries. The ethnic and cultural diversity in Assam is a defining characteristic of the state, but it has often been challenged by the politics surrounding citizenship and migration. The

influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has further complicated the Assamese identity, leading to doubts about who is considered a legitimate citizen. As a result, a clear divide can be seen between the 'indigenous' people and the 'outsiders'. According to Sanjib Baruah, the growing concern with regard to Assamese identity is not a natural discovery, rather it was shaped by a fear of being outnumbered by others. When their economic and cultural space felt threatened, they turned to their language and traditions to hold on to what made them unique⁵. According to some estimates, this complicated issue of migrants of different kinds such as Tea planters, daily wage workers, Muslim and Hindu Bangladeshis and Marwari traders which began as India attains independence, still continues in the region today².

The question of citizenship fueled by migration politics became a controversial topic in Assam. This has led to the rise of identity politics which became a key factor in the Assam struggle and the subsequent developments that followed. This paper aims to explore the historical progression and evolving dynamics of Assamese Nationalism, tracing its roots and examining how it has influenced and intersected with more recent and controversial issues surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In order to fully grasp the complexities of the discourse on citizenship, it is essential to examine its historical foundations whose roots originated in the colonial era, a time when the concept of citizenship was shaped by imperial powers.

Objectives:

The paper's main objective is to assess the influence of colonial and Post-colonial Developments of Narratives on Citizenship Debates in Assam. This paper aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how colonial legacies and post-colonial transformations continue to shape the complex realities of citizenship in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This paper takes a historical approach to explore the colonial and post-colonial narratives of debates of citizenship in Assam. For that purpose, both primary and secondary data are employed in the study. While the primary data comprises of government documents, parliamentary debates, official reports and news articles from both colonial and post-colonial periods. The secondary data covers relevant books, newspaper and journal articles. The paper thus mainly focuses on the qualitative data to analyze the discourses and uncover the underlying ideological shifts and power structures that have influenced citizenship debates along with socio-political dynamics in Assam.



Historical Context: The Colonial Legacy

The colonial history of Assam offers crucial historical background for understanding the ongoing citizenship debate in northeast India. The colonial era under the British during the 19th century remains as an important period in region's history as it left an indelible mark on Assam's demographic, political, and social structures. The treaty of Yandaboo empowered the British East India Company to rule the region after the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). At the initial stages of the war, the British had made a promise to restore the old governmental structure according to the needs of Assamese. However, the British failed to fulfill their commitments as they were guided with their imperialistic attitude concerning the region. Thus, they adopted all tactics to occupy the region of Assam permanently, through the treaty of Yandaboo. This treaty marked the beginning of British control over Assam and Northeast India. Across this span, the region of Assam was not only transformed by economic policies but also became a crucial part of significant colonial administrative restructuring. These policies laid the foundation for various transformations providing groundwork for the imperial ambitions of securing their trade and control over the region. Following its incorporation into the Bengal Presidency in 1838, Assam was administered by the British rule until 1874. Throughout this period, the British designated Bengali as the official language and primarily recruited Bengalis to manage the administration². This marked the beginning of a growing sense of identity consciousness among the Assamese people, and a feeling of resentment and discomfort towards the outsiders (migrants).

With their expansionist strategies, the colonial authorities also merged other kingdoms such as Kachari Kingdom (1838), Khasi Kingdom and Jaintia Kingdom (1832), Maran Matkas (1839) etc. to generate more revenues and control in the region. For that purpose, the British rule had appointed the King Purandar Singha to collect land revenues assuring the development in the area. The British were mostly active in the plain areas of Assam, where they brought people from East Bengal settle on agrarian land through short and long term leases. They started growing cash crops like jute and tea and extracted oil and coal in large amounts, which changed the region's economy and demography. The British also brought in workers – especially to work on tea plantations in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, where land was leased for longer periods⁶. However, the profits made from natural resources such as tea, coal, and petroleum were not shared with the local people. This exploitation led to growing anger and resentment towards the colonial rule. Adding on to this, the policy of large scale immigration from various regions of India such as central India, Orissa, Bengal and Jharkhand etc. infuriated the local people thereby igniting the consciousness of Assamese identity. The colonial authorities brought in the Bengali Muslims to cultivate the

fertile land, contribute to the growing industries and to take up various administrative roles under their governance⁷. To fight against this, several movements were organized by the locals to dethrone the British and restore the Ahom Monarchy. Phulaguri uprising and Patharughat uprising of 1861 and 1894 respectively are significant in this context.

During the mid-19th century, the rise in national consciousness compelled the colonial authorities to shift their outlook towards the claims of their subjects. Subsequently, they adopted various policies such as non-interference in the private domains of the groups, inner line system, separate administrative procedures and a forward policy of 1866 acknowledging the difference between hill tribes and plain people. However, this approach solely served to construct and reinforce the subjectivities of the colonized, aligning them with colonial objectives⁷. According to Sanjib Baruah, the continuation of inner line only upheld a dual citizenship paradigm⁸. In 1874, the British decided to separate Assam from the Bengal province and made it a Chief Commissioner's Province, with Shillong as its capital. Sylhet, a Bengali-speaking region and Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) were also brought into this new administrative set up. Later, the partition of Bengal – East Bengal and West Bengal developed a rift between Hindus and Muslims making the Assamese Hindu and Bengali Muslim relationship bitter. The reunification of Bengal further complicated Assam's division along linguistic lines as the region carved out two Hindu Bengali dominated and Muslim Bengali dominated Cachar and Sylhet to it. During this timeline, the region witnessed a massive inflow immigrants from East Pakistan marking the fear of demographic imbalance. According to Chetna Sharma, the largest movement of migrants occurred post-1900, with Bengali Muslims migrating from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to the Brahmaputra valley². To further suppress the national consciousness and foster divisions, the colonial rule decided to make a divide among the hills and plains people with the Government of India Act, 1935, which designated two hill zones – excluded and partially excluded areas. The excluded areas included the areas of Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills and the Frontier Zones of Balipara, Sadiya and Lakhimpur, while the partially excluded areas comprised the North Cachar Hills, the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills, and the Khasi and Jaintia hills⁷. The division was made to develop these areas by providing exclusive legal and administrative freedom, however such developments only strengthen ethno-national identities and narratives demanding separate homeland in post-independence era.

The process of migration and outsiders into the region of Assam thus, is not a new phenomenon. So far, it is clear that the region under then Assam had experienced migration for the first time under colonial rule. Seeking to capitalize on the region's favorable climate and natural resources, the British annexed Assam as part of their imperial aspirations. Before British annexation, Assam had a largely self-sustaining



agrarian economy with its indigenous communities. Yasmin Saikia noted that, at the beginning of the British rule, Assamese society was largely homogenous and integrated, with various indigenous communities living together despite their cultural differences¹. The British government actively encouraged the migration of workers to Assam, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition to the tea plantations, other economic ventures, such as the expansion of railway networks and the extraction of timber, further exacerbated migration patterns. By the time of India's independence in 1947, these policies had led to the settlement of a large population of Bengali, Bihari, and other Indian migrants in Assam. The migrant workers not only changed the region's ethnic composition but also became part of the economic, social, and political landscape, creating tensions with the indigenous Assamese population.

Post-Colonial Developments and the Emergence of Assamese Nationalism

The legacy of colonial policies left Assam with a complex and often contentious demographic composition. While the British administration sought to consolidate control over Assam, they inadvertently sowed the seeds for future conflict by introducing policies that altered the region's ethnic and cultural balance. As discussed in the previous section, the British introduced labor migration to work in the tea plantations, resulting in the settlement of Bengali-speaking migrants, as well as individuals from other parts of British India. This migration changed the region's demographic makeup and sowed the seeds of social and political unrest. In the decades following British colonial rule, the newly independent Indian state struggled with how to accommodate diverse regional identities. Assam was no exception. While the region had its own unique identity, shaped by its indigenous communities and the Assamese language, the impact of colonial migration policies—especially those that encouraged settlement from neighboring Bengal—was felt long after the end of British rule. The indigenous Assamese, witnessing the increasing presence of Bengali speakers, were left with a lingering sense of political marginalization and cultural dilution. These anxieties would fuel the rise of Assamese nationalism, which began to gain momentum in the early years of Indian independence.

The independence of India in 1947 not only marked the conclusion of British rule but another phase of population movement as well. The partition and its aftermath significantly implied the birth of two nations and the future contestation on the issue citizenship in independent India. Assam for instance consistently raised concerns about the flow of immigration from the then East Pakistan. With the independence of India, the people of Assam had great expectations that immigration would eventually cease. However, despite their hopes, it turned out to be easier for the refugees to cross the border and find shelter

in Assam, either on their own or with the help from their relatives⁹. The dominant anti-immigration narrative in Assam sustained from then on. The perception of potential threat of immigration towards the distinct identity of Assamese was visible in 1947 when the people of Assam expressed reluctance in accommodating refugees².

With a population that increased six-fold until the 1980s compared to less than threefold for India, Assam experienced the fastest-growing population as compared to the Indian subcontinent (Weiner, 1983). The end of colonial rule brought no changes to the existing immigration scenario in the region of Assam. The Nehruvian government adopted a liberal strategy towards the immigration which made the situation worse. Following India's partition, the eastern borders were not adequately secured like the western borders, which resulted in a constant influx of immigrants. This was not the only the case when the state felt ignored by the Indian Union. When Gopinath Bordoloi, the then premier of Assam, called for the inner line permit, the center refused to provide funds and instead asked the state to allow the migrants entry. In 1964, the State Congress legislative party called for the total sealing of India-Pakistan borders, but their requests were not fulfilled. Instead, following the 1965 Indo-Pak War, the Assam Police forces were replaced by the Border Security forces. As a result, Assam's population rose 34.93% faster than the state's average growth rate of 19.93%, and the huge migration from East Pakistan continued⁹. Following the 1971 Liberation War, Bangladesh gained its independence, and the Assamese started to fear that the new and continuous stream of migration would threaten their identity and dominance. Between 1971 and 1991, the population of Assam grew by 52.44%. Thus, to define an immigrant and an indigenous community in a culturally mixed region of Assam became a complicated task. According to Chetna Sharma, the emphasis on geo-cultural connection between ethnic groups and geography made the indigeneity of the community a disputed matter. This fear was further heightened by the fact the hill regions, where the tribal population lived, had already split into independent states. Thus, in the 1980s, there was an anti-immigrant movement that led to the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985².

In response to the emerging challenges, the government adopted various measures aimed at effectively addressing this issue. Some suggestions were made to keep 1951 as the cut-off date for deportation for those who had not had their names in the National Register. Afterwards, it was only through the Assam movement that the issue was put on the national agenda, as a result of which the Union approved the India Bangla border and fence project. The Assamese (Asamiya) Nationalism started to grow in the region through political mobilization by the locals on accounts of language, jobs and land developments. The most crucial form of Assamese Nationalism was visible through



the famous Assam movement of six years, spanning from 1979 to 1985.

The primary goals driving this movement was the identification and deportation of illegal immigrants, thereby opposing the large-scale migration of Bengali-speaking individuals to Assam. However, the movement was not just about fighting the illegal immigrants but also about claiming the right of indigenous population to maintain political and regional autonomy over the land and resources. It also reflected the desire of the indigenous people of Assam to protect their language, culture and identity, which they feared was challenged by the increasing number of outsiders. During the 1960s, a lot of resentment was generated towards the outsiders like Bengalis and Marwari businessmen for not employing the local people, thus, continued the anti-Bengali movement². Thus, the Assam movement was marked by widespread protests and clashes between the indigenous population and the migrant groups, demanding action against illegal settlers. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU), which played a key role in the movement, argued that the state's demographic changes were undermining the political and cultural rights of the Assamese people. The Assamese nationalist leaders also argued that the inflow of migrants from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) had destabilized the region's political balance and led to the marginalization of indigenous Assamese people. A key aspect of the Assam Movement was the demand to update voter rolls and conduct a comprehensive survey of the population to identify illegal immigrants. For that purpose, the Assam Accord of 1985 was signed between Rajiv Gandhi (the then Prime Minister) and representatives of All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). The Assam Accord of 1985 provided a system of determination and legitimization of citizenship status. The provisions of Assam Accord specified the regularization and disfranchisement of 10 years for those immigrants who had entered between 1st January 1966 and 24th March 1971. In addition, those entered after the cut-off date of 24th March 1971 were to be identified as aliens (non-voters) and then deported. However, an additional layer of complexity to this is introduced through the changes made in citizenship provision, under which those who were born before July 1987 to the undocumented immigrants could opt for the Indian citizenship by birth in accordance with the provisions of Section 3 of the Citizenship Act. According to Anupama Roy, the state of Assam was equated with a Hyphenated citizenship as the cut-off date for the Indian citizenship is 19th July 1948, whereas Assam applied a different cut-off date of 24th March 1971, making it an exception to the constitution deadline¹⁰.

The Assamese people are granted constitutional protections for the preservation of their language and culture under clause 6 of the Assam Accord. It says that constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards, as may be appro-

priate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the social, cultural and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. The Assam Accord became a landmark agreement, promising to safeguard the interests of the indigenous people while granting citizenship rights to those who were deemed legitimate residents. The Assam Accord was a significant step in addressing the grievances of the indigenous Assamese people but also laid the groundwork for the future citizenship debate in the state. The Accord, however, did not resolve the underlying tensions between Assamese nationalism and migrant populations, and the questions of who could claim citizenship in Assam remained unresolved. In addition, the Illegal Migrant Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDT) of 1983 established that the burden of proving citizenship rests with the complainant, protecting legitimate Indian nationals. It was believed that the Foreigners Act of 1946 was insufficient to safeguard linguistic and religious minorities, thus this act was passed. Consequently, this statute also gave the Central government and police the authority to deny an application if it was deemed pointless and vexatious. The Supreme Court later abolished it in 2005 declaring it deviant and unfair after Sarbananda Sonowal filed a writ suit, stating that the culture of a whole people is being eroded to the point that they may eventually be displaced by people who have no right to be in this nation².

From what has been discussed so far in the study, it is evident that the massive influx of refugees from Bangladesh has sowed the seeds of Assamese fear of marginalization, creating a significant divide between the native Assamese population and Bengali-speaking immigrants from Bangladesh. The most obvious repercussions of this division are shown by the differences between the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys of Assam on various subjects. The two valleys have been split along linguistic and cultural lines since 1947, when part of the Barak Valley stayed in India and the Bengali-speaking Sylhet district joined East Pakistan. Geographical differences were also evident in party politics: the BJP backed its coalition, while the AGP opposed and broke from the association. Furthermore, it was opposed in the Brahmaputra Valley but supported in the Barak Valley by the Congress wing (ibid). For many years, a persistent and deeply ingrained fear of social alienation and political dominance has long been the main cause of tension and conflict between the two groups of Bengalis and Assamese in the area, influencing their perspectives and adding to the long-standing climate of distrust and rivalry. Language played a significant role in the emergence of Assamese Nationalism. The Assamese population can be split into two categories according to the census of 1971: those who spoke 48 languages and dialects and those who spoke 76 languages and dialects. Approximately 72.5% of the population is Hindu, while 24.6% is Muslim, and about 2.61% of people are Christians, with smaller portions of Buddhists, Jains,



Sikhs, and other residuals. However, these records cannot be considered as appropriate data as the ethnicity and demography characteristics may vary overtime. In the areas of the Brahmaputra valley, where some of the Bengali speakers are immigrants, Assamese is considered as the mother tongue of the region, but Bengali is an indigenous language in the Cachar district of the Barak Valley.

Following the early years of independence, the political leadership of the state focused on establishing cultural policies that aimed to define the state as Assamese. Between independence and the Assam movement of 1979 to 1985, the Assamese nationalists pursued to adopt several changes throughout the region on linguistic and cultural basis – for instance to establish Assamese as the official language of the state and educational institutions and job opportunities on preferential basis. According to Sanjib Barua, the linguistic division of Assam was a reflection of the inhabitants' concerns about maintaining their ethnic identity and culture. These cultural policies of ethnic Assamese were supported by the Bengali Muslim immigrants, however the Bengali Hindu immigrants (mostly from the Barak valley) stood in the opposition to such policies¹¹. These differences eventually sparked numerous anti-Bengali protests and riots of 1948, 1950, 1960, 1968, 1972 and 1980. The 1961 language movement was the most concerning manifestation of this split between the Bengalis and Assamese of the two valleys of Assam. The Bengalis of the Barak Valley fiercely opposed Assamese's designation as the state language of Assam. Although it cost them eleven martyrs, they rejected this implementation. Later in 1972, there was another demonstration against the Assam language being taught in colleges in the Barak Valley. This was exacerbated by the anti-foreign agitation of the late 1970s. The contentious 1986 Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) circular making Assamese a required language only served to heighten the already existing animosity; nonetheless, it was eventually revoked as a result of the Barak's opposition¹².

The lingering differences between the native Assamese and Bengali speakers in the Brahmaputra and Barak valley respectively, went beyond the linguistic factors to more substantial political and administrative aspects. While there are numerous literary and scholarly works that explore the emergence of Assamese nationalism and consciousness in response to the politics of partition and migration, there remains a significant gap in research addressing the perspectives and experiences of the Barak Valley. Following the division of Sylhet and the continued animosity, the Bengalis of Barak Valley also feared social and political marginalization in the region. Thus, they demanded a separate state for South Assam, known as 'Pubachal', in a mass meeting of Congress in 1948. The notion was first proposed in a congress party convention in April 1948. In September 1948, a separate homeland consisting of Tripura, Manipur, and Undivided Cachar was established when

the plan was approved. However, it wasn't consolidated for long. A few years later, in April 1954, the three-member States Reorganization Committee (SRC) received a memorandum titled 'Purbachal Reconsidered' from the Cachar States Reorganization Committee (CSRC) and a few allied organizations. However, the CSRC's demand was rejected, leading to the dismissal of Purbachal's claims to be a separate state¹².

The Cachar/Barak Valley experienced yet another explosion on 24th October 1960, when the Assam Assembly enacted the Assamese Language Bill, declaring Assamese the official language. In response, Barak Valley suggested a distinct administrative structure at a joint convention of the Congress Committee of Silchar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi. A number of memorandums were presented to the Indian government in order to establish the Barak Valley as a Union territory. However, it failed because of the lack of political support (ibid.). This region continues to be disregarded and alienated by the upper Assam and mainland India. In fact, after independence, this valley was in a very bad shape and isolated. From an economic standpoint, this region was regarded as highly underdeveloped. As we have moved through this part of the discussion, it has become quite apparent that the points raised so far clearly show that the struggle to protect Assamese identity was both cultural and political because the majority of migrants who spoke Bengali were seen as part of a greater challenge to the native Assamese people's political sovereignty.

Politics of Migration, NRC & CAA

Although the problem of migration had been present in Assam for many years, it only became more prominent in the years following independence, especially as Assamese Nationalism grew. The identification of illegal immigrants was complicated and controversial due to ongoing migration, changing political landscapes and differing perspectives on what it meant to be an Assamese citizen. The continuous influx of Bangladeshi migrants, throughout the 1980s, reignited the demands for stricter laws to ensure that only those with genuine connections to the region would be allowed to stay. The National Register of Citizens (NRC), a government program to document all Assamese people who are legally citizens, has been the most important policy intervention in the citizenship controversy in recent years. In order to save Assam, it was also proposed that the NRC date be moved from 1971 to 1951. The main objective of the NRC was to locate and register all Assamese people who were legitimate citizens while excluding illegal immigrants, especially those who had arrived after the 1971 deadline set by the Assam Accord. The NRC process started in the 1950s, but it was until the 2005 Supreme Court ruling that it was rekindled full. The final list, which was released in 2019 following years of scrutiny and a protracted verification process, left out almost 19 lakh (1.9 million)



persons from the list of valid citizens. The conflicts regarding citizenship in Assam were brought to light by the release of the NRC list. The NRC was viewed by many members of the indigenous Assamese community as a means of guaranteeing the protection of the Assamese people's rights. But the NRC was an existential catastrophe for others, especially the marginalized groups. Many of the people who were disqualified were Muslims who spoke Bengali, and they claimed that their rejection was due to prejudice based on their race and religion rather than an impartial evaluation of their citizenship. The difficulties faced by individuals who had to present documentary proof of their citizenship and the NRC's lack of transparency have drawn criticism. For some, the NRC came to represent the fight for indigenous rights and Assamese identity. Others saw it as a tool of discrimination and exclusion, especially those from underrepresented groups.

The goal of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) final list, which was released on August 31, 2019, was to distinguish Assamese citizens from "illegal migrants." Nearly 1.9 million residents, however, have been left out and confined to legal and administrative limbo. This puts marginalized communities in even more precarious situations because they have less access to legal aid. There are concerns regarding the NRC's legal authority because it has been over five years since the central government formally notified it. Legal evaluations and local reports indicate that the majority of excluded people are involved in protracted appeals in Foreigners Tribunals (FTs), where cases can drag on for years, even though no updated official exclusion figure has been made public. Meanwhile, fear of detention, loss of livelihood, and potential statelessness shape daily life of a sizable portion of the excluded population, including char-dwellers and landless agricultural laborers. One of the most frequent reasons for exclusion is still document inconsistencies, such as misspelled words or records from before 1971. The requirement for pre-1971 lineage records (for NRC) or proof of religious and national origin (for CAA) disproportionately disadvantages the marginalized groups in the state of Assam, where social and economic marginalization, as well as displacements caused by floods, have historically restricted access to documents. Inconsistencies between NRC data and Aadhaar/voter records make it difficult for even those who are part of the NRC to access state benefits¹³. A complex interplay of legal, administrative, economic, social, and psychological factors sustains the uncertainty surrounding citizenship in Assam following the NRC. As previously mentioned, the NRC is still not notified by the central government, so even the 2019 final list has no legal standing. As a result, those who have been excluded have been left in a state of protracted uncertainty, with their future dependent on the sluggish Foreigners Tribunals (FTs), where appeals can take years. Administratively, many people—both included and excluded—have been

compelled to go through multiple verification cycles due to differences between NRC entries and other official databases like Aadhaar, voter rolls, and land records. Rural populations that lack official birth or land records are disproportionately affected by these discrepancies, which are frequently the result of misspellings or incomplete historical records. Economically, many households have been forced into distress migration or deeper debt due to exclusion from the NRC or unresolved status, which has resulted in barriers to land registration, disqualification from formal employment, and denial of access to certain government welfare programs. Social divisions between ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups have only gotten worse as a result of the process; political discourse frequently paints entire communities as "suspect," undermining trust between them. According to NGO assessments and ethnographic studies, psychologically, the prolonged uncertainty and the imminent threat of detention have caused widespread anxiety, fear, and depression. Some excluded families have even avoided hospitals or schools out of concern because they would attract official attention (ibid). Because of these interlocking forces, citizenship in Assam is now more than just a question of legal recognition; it is a daily battle for survival, dignity, and belonging. In the current environment, it is no longer viewed as a guaranteed right but rather as a status that is subject to ongoing evaluation and is conditional, unstable, and intricately linked to political, administrative, and historical fault lines.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 has further complicated the whole Assamese citizenship debate and related arguments. In the state of Assam, the Citizenship Act added a religious dimension to itself by granting Indian citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. With a religious component, the CAA was seen by the Assamese community as a continuation of the same migration schemes, they had fought since the colonial era. Various indigenous communities and groups opposed it, claiming that it went against the center's commitment to the Assam accord, which stated that all illegal immigrants, regardless of their religion, entering Assam after the deadline of March 24, 1971, must be identified and deported from India. In addition, it sparked grave worries about threats to the culture, language, and identity of indigenous communities as well as potential effects on state citizens' rights to property ownership, government appointments, funding, and political representation. Moreover, it is almost impossible to provide a comprehensive proof technique to verify whether migration has occurred due to religious persecution. Some argue that if religious persecution is the justification for lowering citizenship criteria, then persecuted minorities, such as the Ahmadiyahs of Pakistan and the Rohingyas of Myanmar, are waiting to be accommodated². This act has also led to the division of the two valleys in the region – Assam



dominated Brahmaputra valley and Bengali dominated Barak Valley. The former opposes this proposal because of its antimigration position however, the latter defends it by pointing its support for Bengalis from Bangladesh. Additionally, by stating that regions covered under sixth schedule or inner line permit system (ILP) are not covered by this legislation, the government seemed to use colonial tactics to divide individuals based on their status as tribe or non-tribal members. As a result, this act also gives authority to split Assam based on linguistic, geographical, and tribal/nontribal distinctions⁷.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which was passed in 2019, significantly changed India's citizenship laws, but in Assam, it clashed with historical and political realities that influenced the NRC process. The CAA may have given legitimacy to the presence of people who would have been denied entry under the Assam Accord by moving the cut-off for some groups to 2014. Some Assamese have viewed this as a threat to their culture and demographics. This fear was reflected in the 2019–2020 protest movements in Guwahati, Dibrugarh, and other districts, where participants were frequently drawn from groups that would have otherwise backed the NRC. Assamese nationalist organizations fear that CAA will change demographic balances and legitimize outsiders, and they see it as a betrayal of the Assam Accord. Two parallel uncertainties characterize the citizenship landscape in the state of Assam following the CAA: one for religious minorities who were excluded from the NRC but were eligible for CAA relief, and another for those who were still excluded and ineligible under the CAA. As a result, citizenship has evolved from a uniform constitutional status into a stratified model of citizenship rights, where bureaucratic obstacles intersect with factors such as religion, place of origin, and date of arrival. A "hierarchy of belonging" has been established, according to Banerjee and Ranjan, as a result of the NRC and CAA being layered on top of one another. Some people have safe, uncontested citizenship, others are pursuing legalization through the CAA, and a residual group faces the possibility of permanent statelessness¹³. The politics of citizenship in Assam today, in actuality, operate as a negotiated identity due to the overlapping legal framework. The NRC and CAA's combined effects have institutionalized eligibility based on "conditional" documentation, deepening Assamese ethnic and religious fault lines that have existed for a long time and escalating political and social polarization.

In Assam, there is a tense relationship between the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). In *Assam Public Works v. Union of India* (2013), the Supreme Court closely monitored the implementation of the NRC in order to comply with the 1985 Assam Accord, which set March 24, 1971, as the deadline for identifying "foreigners." Nearly 19.06 lakh people were left off of the final list, which was released on August 31, 2019,

causing panic and intense legal disputes. In order to ensure a judicial pathway, the Court ordered that such individuals could approach Foreigners' Tribunals within 120 days, and subsequently the High Courts and the Supreme Court if necessary. However, this placed a burden on Assam's already precarious tribunal system. However, the CAA, 2019 modifies the regulations by granting citizenship to Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Hindus who came to India prior to December 31, 2014, from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This directly contradicts the NRC's tenet, which states that individuals are excluded based solely on their documentation, regardless of their religious beliefs, whereas the CAA re-admits certain migrants based solely on their religious beliefs. This creates what critics refer to as a "discriminatory loophole" because a Muslim cannot apply for citizenship under the CAA while a Hindu who is not allowed to join the NRC can. The courts have heard this contradiction. In *Indian Union Muslim League v. Union of India* (2020), petitioners contend that the CAA violates Article 14 of the Constitution (right to equality) by establishing citizenship based on religion. The case is being heard by the Supreme Court. The constitutionality of the law is still up for debate because the Court has sent notices but has not yet rendered a decision. In cases such as *Rahima Khatun v. Union of India* (2019), the Gauhati High Court has held that foreigners' tribunals cannot reject claims based on minor documentation errors. It has also ruled that ration cards or voter list entries alone cannot prove citizenship. These decisions demonstrate the difficulty judges face in striking a balance between rigorous legal requirements and humanitarian considerations.

Assam has had a significant impact. Socially, the NRC process caused a great deal of fear, particularly in rural and impoverished areas where historical records were scarce. Stigma and uncertainty resulted from the division of families, with some members included and others excluded. In terms of money, people gathered documents, hired attorneys, and fought cases for years and life savings. Politically, the CAA has reopened old wounds. Many Assamese are afraid that it will "legalize" Hindu migrants from Bengal after 1971, thereby undermining the Assam accord and jeopardizing the state's delicate demographic balance. Regional parties and student organizations like the All Assam Students Union (AASU) contend that the CAA violates Assam's long-standing fight to preserve its language and culture. Leaders of the ruling party, such as Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sharma, are balancing a pledge to resign if NRC-excluded individuals are granted citizenship under the CAA while simultaneously guaranteeing that "very few" in Assam will benefit from it. Therefore, one's point of view determines whether the NRC-CAA Framework is a threat or a solution. The central government uses a two-step procedure: CAA to protect specific groups and NRC to filter. However, in Assam, it appears to be



more of a contradiction: while CAA includes on one basis, NRC excludes on another. It has exacerbated political tension, social mistrust, and legal disputes rather than resolving the migration issue. Assam might continue to be caught in a cycle of legal disputes, demonstrations, and uncertainty unless the Supreme Court rules that the CAA is constitutional and the government responds to the humanitarian concerns of those excluded from the NRC.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper illustrated the colonial heritage and post-colonial advancements concerning citizenship legislation and migration politics. The emerging controversies around the politics of citizenship in Assam has its roots in the region's colonial past, when British policies—specifically those pertaining to migration, land control, and economic exploitation—established the groundwork for current realities and struggle for political autonomy, identity, and belonging. The social and political circumstances that still support Assamese nationalism and the current citizenship disputes are a result of the colonial legacy of promoting migration from Bengal to Assam, marginalizing indigenous cultures, and exploiting the region's resources for profit. The post-colonial developments have only added onto this complexity with continued migration particularly from Bangladesh, changing dynamics of migration and citizenship policies and increasing concerns about the preservation of Assamese language and culture. Thus, in order to understand the ongoing and contemporary dilemmas over citizenship and identity politics in the region, it is crucial to study historical legacies and their manifestations. Citizenship is not simply a matter of legal considerations but also a question of cultural survival, political and regional autonomy. The citizenship issue has become a contentious issue in Assam due to a number of policies and changes to the Indian citizenship laws that have made Assam an exception. Hence, it is not only the lengthy history of migration but also the intricacy of dates, records, the challenge of making precise estimations, and the widening split in the area. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) claims and the Citizenship Act, which favors citizenship based on religious identification, also contradicts India's secular status and the Assam Accord, as well as other Supreme Court rulings that have held that citizenship cannot be granted based

on religion². The citizenship issue therefore should not be viewed as distinct but addressed nationally. This paper is an attempt to explore the implications of the numerous citizenship laws and revisions from colonial times to the present that have been introduced by various political entities in the region.

REFERENCES

1. Saikia P. Citizenship, Nationality, Discord, Accord and Assam: A Brief History. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2023;58(23):5355. Available from: <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/23/special-articles/citizenship-nationality-discord-accord-and-assam.html>.
2. Sharma C. Citizenship Amendment Bill 2016: continuities and contestations with special reference to politics in Assam, India. *Asian Ethnicity*. 2019;20(4):522–540. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1601993>.
3. Government of India. Constitution of India (Articles 5-11). Ministry of Law and Justice. 1950. Available from: <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india>.
4. Assam State Portal. Assam State Portal. Government of Assam. . Available from: <https://assam.gov.in/>.
5. Baruah S. The politics of non-citizenship in Assam. *Economic and political weekly*. 2014;49(40):10–12. Available from: <https://india-seminar.com/2022/749/749-SANJIB%20BARUAH.htm>.
6. Barbor S. The crisis of citizenship in Assam. *The India Forum*. 2019, February 14. Available from: <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/crisis-citizenship-assam>.
7. Gogoi K. Citizenship and the question of indigeneity in Assam. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*. 2020;7(1):331–334. Available from: <https://www.ijrar.org/papers/IJAR2001609.pdf>.
8. Baruah S. Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India. Oxford University Press. 2005. Available from: <https://archive.org/details/durableorderu0000baru>.
9. Dutta N. Immigration in Assam: A historical perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*. 2015;4(1):30–32. Available from: [https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4\(1\)/Version-1/G04101030032.pdf](https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4(1)/Version-1/G04101030032.pdf).
10. Roy A. Mapping Citizenship in India. Oxford University Press. 2010. Available from: https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Mapping_Citizenship_in_India.html?id=AoAyDwAAQBAJ&source=kp_book_description&redir_esc=y.
11. Baruah S. Immigration, ethnic conflict, and political turmoil: Assam 1979–1985. *Asian Survey*. 1986;26(11):1184–1206. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644315>.
12. Bhattacharya J. Partition, politics and the quest for Bengali identity: A case of Barak Valley in South Assam. *Refugee Watch: A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration*. 2023;61 & 62:123–139. Available from: http://www.mcrq.ac.in/rw%20files/RW61_62/RW61_62.pdf.
13. Banerjee D, Ranjan A. Illegal Migrants in Assam and West Bengal: The Socio-politics of NRC and CAA. In: *The Aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971*. Routledge. 2024. Available from: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003463627-2/illegal-migrants-assam-west-bengal-dhimoyee-banerjee-amit-ranjan>.

