

The Indian State of Assam: Origins and Causes of Conflict



Background

- The Indian state of Assam is located in the country's Northeast and shares international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh.
- According to provisional Indian census figures for 2011, Assam has a population of over 31 million with an area of 78,438 square kilometers (48,739 miles).ⁱ
- Assam is home to several indigenous tribes, including the Bodos, who are numerically the largest tribe in the state, comprising just over 5% of the total population. The Bodos are primarily Hindus (90.31%), but also include a significant number of Christians (9.4%).ⁱⁱ
- The large scale migration of ethnic Bengali Muslims from what is now Bangladesh dates back to British colonial rule in India, when they were imported as laborers. Subsequently, prior to the partition of the subcontinent, Muslim political leaders encouraged Bengali Muslims to migrate to Assam for political purposes and envisioned Assam as part of Pakistan's eastern wing along with East Bengal. Pakistani leaders continued to assert claims over Assam after partition, including former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and East Pakistan leader (and later Bangladesh independence leader) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The mass population movement of Bengali Muslims into Assam continued after the departure of the British and proliferated with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Since 1971, large numbers of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh have illegally crossed the porous Indo-Bangladesh border into India's northeastern states, including Assam, for economic reasons.^{iv}
- There are no official statistics on the number of illegal Bangladeshis in India in general, although some unofficial estimates put the number at 20 million. Similarly, there is no concrete data on the number of Bangladeshi migrants in Assam specifically, although in 2005, former Assam Governor, Lt. Gen. Ajai Singh reported that close to 6,000 Bangladeshis enter Assam every day.^v

Impact of Cross-Border Migration from Bangladesh

- The large scale migration from Bangladesh has significantly altered demographics in India's northeastern states, leading to social, economic, and political tensions between tribals and Bangladeshi Muslim settlers. For instance, in Assam, Muslims make up approximately 33% of Assam's population, and 11 out of 27 districts in the state now contain Muslim majorities. Bodo leaders in Assam assert that Bangladeshi Muslims are using their growing power to impose their culture and religion in the area.^{vi}
- Illegal Bangladeshi migrants have systematically appropriated farming, grazing, and forest lands traditionally used by the Bodos and other indigenous tribes in Assam for their livelihood, leading to fear and resentment amongst the tribal population.^{vii}
- Along with illegal migrants, drug smugglers and other criminal elements frequently cross the Indo-Bangladesh border into Assam. Additionally, according to Indian officials, many Bangladeshi Muslim settlers in Assam are now engaged in the illegal cultivation and distribution of narcotics in the state.^{viii}
- Some Indian political parties in Assam, such as the Communist Party of India and the Congress, have allegedly encouraged illegal migration from Bangladesh, using Bangladeshi Muslim settlers to strengthen their political base and capture favorable votes in elections. Moreover, illegal migrants are able to easily obtain forged citizenship documents, enabling them to vote and access government services.^{ix}
- In the 1978 Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) by-elections in the state, the names of 45,000 illegal Bangladeshi migrants were discovered for the first time on the voter's list, leading to violent

political unrest culminating in the “Assam Agitation” (1979-1985) spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU).^x

- India’s Supreme Court recently noted the magnitude of the problem when it stated that Assam was facing “external aggression and internal disturbance,” due to the large-scale migration from Bangladesh.^{xi}

Political and Security Conditions in Assam

- The mass influx of Bangladeshi Muslims has been a destabilizing force in Assam and has resulted in a number of political and security challenges in the state.
- After years of government neglect and apathy and a failure to address the issue of illegal immigration, the Bodos launched an armed insurgency in the 1980s to carve out a separate Bodoland state from Assam (within India).^{xii}
- Bodo insurgent groups initially laid down their arms in 1993 in return for greater autonomy and the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). The insurgency, however, resumed until 2003 when the Bodos signed a peace accord with the state and central governments, resulting in the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).^{xiii}
- The BTC administers the Bodo heartland of Assam in the districts of Kokhrajjar, Chirang, Baska, and Udalguri, collectively known as the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD). The BTAD is governed by separate laws recognized under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and tribal regulations.^{xiv}
- The creation of the BTC and BTAD has failed to protect the rights of the Bodos or curb the unabated migration from Bangladesh, leaving them increasingly vulnerable. In addition, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution has been amended to safeguard the land rights of “all communities” in the BTAD, effectively allowing Bangladeshi settlers to continue occupying tribal land.^{xv}
- Beyond the Bodo insurgency, other militant groups have been active in Assam, including the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which began with an anti-foreigner agenda and sought to secede from India. Similarly, Muslim militant organizations have reportedly proliferated in Assam in recent years, with some demanding the creation of a separate Muslim state. Some militant groups have operated from across the border in Bangladesh.^{xvi}

Bodo-Muslim Violence in Assam

- There is a history of violent conflict over land in Assam between the indigenous Bodo tribals and ethnic Bengali Muslim settlers dating back to 1952, with subsequent violent clashes occurring in 1979-1985, 1991-1994, and 2008.^{xvii}
- The most recent riots and violence between Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims erupted in July 2012 in the BTAD districts of Kokhrajjar, Chirang, and Dhubri. According to the Asian Centre for Human Rights, 77 people were killed and over 400,000 displaced from the violence, including both Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims.^{xviii}
- Although authorities were slow to respond to the violence, there is no indication that the government played any role in the violence. Many of the displaced victims have been temporarily housed in relief camps, and the Central government has promised up to 300 crore rupees (approximately \$5.5 million) in rehabilitation and development aid.^{xix}
- Although the immediate cause of the riots was the targeted killings of four Bodo men by Bangladeshi Muslims, Indian political and security analysts attribute the violence to larger economic, social, and political issues. For instance, Dr Bhagat Oinam, Director of the North-East India Studies Program at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, contends that the riots were

the result of Bodo resentment against Bangladeshi immigration and the consequent loss of land and cultural identity.^{xx}

- In the aftermath of the riots, there have been widespread protests across the northeast demanding “early detection and deportation” of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. The Bodos have now joined other indigenous tribal communities in Assam to collectively address the issue.^{xxi}
- Following the violence, northeastern students living in other parts of India received threats from a radical Muslim organization known as the Popular Front of India (PFI), according to India’s National Cyber Investigation Agency. Moreover, Muslims groups organized violent protests in Mumbai in response to the Assam riots (and violence in Mynamar), resulting in two deaths and 53 injuries. And the All Bodoland Muslim Student’s Union (ABMSU) has threatened to declare jihad and take up arms against the state.^{xxii}

Policy Recommendations

- The Central Indian Government and State Government in Assam must take all necessary steps to fully rehabilitate the victims of the recent riots and ensure the safety of all communities in the state going forward.
- India must protect the social, economic, and political rights of the vulnerable tribal population in Assam and comprehensively address the underlying issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh.
- The U.S. should encourage the Government of Bangladesh to implement strong measures to curtail the flow of illegal immigrants, militants, and drugs from its side of the Indo-Bangladesh border in order to prevent further destabilization of the region.

ⁱ “Census of India 2011, Provisional Population Totals,” Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/assam/Paper-1-I.pdf.

ⁱⁱ “Census of India - Socio-cultural aspects, Table ST-14,” 2001, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, at Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodo_people#cite_note-census2001-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Illegal Migration into Assam,” Presented to the President of India by the Governor of Assam, November 8, 1998, at South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP), http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam.htm.

^{iv} *Id.*

^v Venky Vembu, “Assam riots: Fruits of Living in Denial over Bangladesh Influx,” July 25, 2012, First Post, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/assam-riots-fruits-of-living-in-denial-over-bangladesh-influx-390536.html>; K.P.S. Gill (SATP), “India: Demographic Invasion in Assam - Analysis,” August 14, 2012, at Eurasia Review, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/14082012-india-demographic-invasion-in-assam-analysis/>.

^{vi} “Assam riots: Fruits of living in denial over Bangladesh influx,” <http://www.firstpost.com/india/assam-riots-fruits-of-living-in-denial-over-bangladesh-influx-390536.html>; H.S. Brahma, “How to Share Assam,” Indian Express, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/how-to-share-assam/980438/0>; Anup Sharma, “Extinction Fear Haunts Indigenous Assamese,” September 17, 2012, Daily Pioneer, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/home/online-channel/360-todays-newspaper/94985-extinction-fear-haunts-indigenous-assamese.html>; “Illegal Migration into Assam,” http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam.htm.

^{vii} “Assam riots: Fruits of Living in Denial over Bangladesh Influx,” <http://www.firstpost.com/india/assam-riots-fruits-of-living-in-denial-over-bangladesh-influx-390536.html>; “How to Share Assam,” <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/how-to-share-assam/980438/0>.

^{viii} “BSF Fights Drug Smugglers with Non-Lethal Weapons on India-Bangladesh Border,” October 3, 2012, The Times of India, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-10-03/guwahati/34237619_1_india-bangladesh-border-bsf-check-infiltration; Sanjib Kr Baruah, “Illegal Migrants Turn Assam into Drug Hub,” August 20, 2012, Hindustan Times, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/Illegal-migrants-turn-Assam-into-drug-hub/Article1-916434.aspx>.

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- ix “Illegal Migration into Assam,” SATP, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam.htm; “Assam riots: Fruits of Living in Denial over Bangladesh Influx,” <http://www.firstpost.com/india/assam-riots-fruits-of-living-in-denial-over-bangladesh-influx-390536.html>; “India: Demographic Invasion in Assam - Analysis,” <http://www.eurasiareview.com/14082012-india-demographic-invasion-in-assam-analysis/>; Balbir Punj, “Assam Violence a Fallout of Vote Bank Politics,” August 5, 2012, Indian Express, <http://newindianexpress.com/magazine/voices/article581501.ece>; T. V. Rajeswar, “Problem of Bangladeshi Migrants: Politico-Economic Study in Historical Context” February 17, 2003, The Tribune India, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030217/edit.htm#3>.
- x Namrata Goswami, “Assam in Turmoil,” July 25, 2012, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Assaminturmoil_NamrataGoswami_250712; Swarn Kumar Anand, “Demographic Change and Assam Violence,” August 4, 2012, Daily Pioneer, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/columnists/item/52143-demographic-change-and-assam-violence.html>.
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- xiii *Id.*
- xiv “How to Share Assam,” <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/how-to-share-assam/980438/0>.
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- xvii “Assam in Turmoil,” http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Assaminturmoil_NamrataGoswami_250712.
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