

**Critically analyse the discourse around immigration in Assam. Based on the reading below, do you think that this discourse differs significantly from discourses around immigration in other parts in India which have seen widespread movement of populations across political boundaries? If yes, does the specific geography of Assam play a role in shaping ethnic and identity tensions in the north east?**

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## Introduction

What is probably *the* distinguishing feature of the discourse around illegal immigration in Assam is the amalgamation of several "fault-lines" that are traditionally single components in any such discourse. Not all were necessarily intended by the initiators of The Assam Movement in 1979, but they have come into common parlance in the discourse since, necessitating discussion. Considering their prominence in discourse, one can come up with four such divisions, arranged in order:

- Ethnic Assamese - Bangladeshi Immigrants (Or foreigners in general)
- Assamese (Hindus) - Bengali (Muslims)
- "Ethnic" Assamese - Indigenous Tribals
- Ethnic Assamese - Immigrants from other Indian States (generalising "outsiders")
- Caste hindus - lower casted assamese

If we are to look at other states in the country, we can find instances of each point of contention. Concerns over ethnic pride and identity - the central force behind the Assam Movement - are common across the country; as can be seen in concerns of ethnic Marathis

and in Tamil Nadu. That being said, the “non-ethnic” here include *both* Indian nationals and Foreign nationals. On the other hand we counter fault lines across a religious divide; observed en masse during the Partition at both the eastern and western borders of the country, or during the emigration of Kashmiri Pandits. Movements for tribal freedom too, have been made in multiple states, such as Jharkhand.

Conversation around widespread movement of populations across political boundaries largely share similar themes with minor changes accounting for regional specificity. To analyse and find distinguishing factors in the discourse around immigration, a closer look is required at all such regional factors giving rise to its unique brand of multiple concerns.

## Immigration and Assam: a (summarised) history

Particularly, it helps to go over the major talking points: a summarised background. We need to know how the ethnicity shift happened. Why concerns rose, and what all the factors are that keep it running.

### Historical Factors for the influx

Kaustavmoni Borua describes in detail the influx of "non-Assamese" persons into the area that became to be called such. To summarise his words,

#### British Rule

Assam's population was low. Very low. While the people of the hills lived in relatively small communities, those on the plains had an uncharacteristically low population density, ravaged by diseases and foreign invasion. This was not ideal for the British that took over control of the land - their Empire required resources and utilisation of land; the low count of people meant acres lay "barren" and "waste", succumbing to the wilderness. The Imperial machine therefore kicked in with a mission of **increasing revenue** and overall "productivity" - by repopulating said lands with migrants from other parts of the country, often by force.

“As the cultivable land was much more in proportion to the inhabitants, and as the government did not want to be deprived of the land revenue from these lands, the British administration encouraged large scale immigration into Assam from the various famine-stricken areas and provinces of”

Kaustavmoni Boruah, “Foreigners” in Assam and Assamese Middle Class’

The British also encouraged - and enforced - migration into the State to get workers for the newly opened **Tea Estates**. Aside from this, there was employment to be found in administration when the British moved the governance of Assam outside of Bengal Presidency into its own constituent.

#### Labour dreams of Middle Class Assamese

The Assamese middle class were, till the first 30 years after independence, pro-immigrant, contributing heavily to the demand for East-Bengali and Nepali immigrants who would work in the fields and as cheap labour. In this procurement we see a religious divide; as the East-Bengal labourers were predominantly Muslim (being from a country divided along

religious lines), the more conservative among the neo Middle class in Assam preferred to hire Nepali immigrants. The matter of religious division pops up later, manifesting itself as another issue. Not surprising given the history of this country.

### Prominence of The Bengali in Administration

The Assamese region and its whereabouts were initially governed by the state in Bengal despite ethnic and historic differences. These differences meant it was not too effective at addressing specific local problems faced, particularly matters of local revenue settlement and land management. Even self-governance did not yield much; the requirement of an English education that not many native Assamese had meant the administration was still stacked with Bengalis all over again. “Under the revenue settlement of military officers, while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees from Sylhet have been appointed to Mouzadarships; and for us respectable Assamese to become the riots of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification”, said Maniram Dewan in a memorandum, Those Assamese that desired more native control - such as Boli Narayan Borah - wished such control to be given only to the upper castes. Casteist and anti-Tribal mentalities, too, would go on to affect the Assam Movement.

### Bihari Immigration to Assam

A solution proposed by Rajendra Prasad to concerns over the loss of ethnic identity was to import excess populations from Bihar. It is an interesting solution, especially as it is an early indication of observers taking the issue to be a communal one as opposed to an ethnic one. A higher number of Bihari Hindus would be okay, despite the fact that they, too, were not ethnically “Assamese”. Founders of the Movement in 1979 have not taken this viewpoint, but it is one that has entered the public imagination far too vividly, and had too much of an impact to warrant discarding.

### Bangladesh, 1971

The eastern borders were subject to mass movement of people during the partition of 1947.

### The rise of the “landless native”

- How is the land taken over?
  - Refusal to pay rent
  - Single-cropping vs multi-cropping, “aggression”
  - Dubious land ownership
  - (past) violation of Line System, bribery

### How is this different?

Interesting in this discussion are the observations of why the matter is not the same as that in other universes of discourse. We have already discussed the multi-faulted (not a typo) concerns that were, and the goal is to find out why it was so. Alongside, we note some general observations that are worth a mention.

## General Observations

An interesting difference in the debate over immigration in this particular matter is that there is no reference to the paradox of “Schrodinger’s Immigrant”, where the immigrant is both lazy and detrimental to the economy *and* taking away the native’s jobs. It may be due to the nature of immigration; where the British brought them in specifically to get higher revenues. We are already aware of the stereotype of the “Lazy Assamese” mentioned above.

Another distinguishing factor - albeit one it shares with West Bengal - is in that it is one of the few borders viewing mass migrations in two separate Independence movements. A factor not oft considered is that an Assamese Muslim family may have migrated to the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1947, only to return in 1971. This discounts the constant stream of influx, as that can be normalised out to demonstrate these two blips.

## Geographic Factors

The most prominent factor distinguishing the Assamese situation from others (not on a surface level) that allows for all the conflict over “taking over” to rise is the incredibly **low population of natives**. It was bad enough that the ratio of nonstate people to that of ethnic citizens rose from one in sixteen in 1879 all the way to six in twenty two in 1901.

The low population was, in part, due to the Burmese invasion - influenced by the region’s proximity to Burma. The people of the plains in particular suffered from such, seeing almost a 50% reduction in population.

**Tribals in the hills**, prominently stateless, were neither ethnically nor historically “Assamese”, and yet were classed in with them. This caused issues in the Assam Movement in later years, for failure to incorporate them into the movement on occasion, and active discrimination and violence against on others.

Yet other factors of the region’s geographic isolation can be considered, too. Its **relative isolation** and the somewhat “east asian” features of its natives exacerbated the ethnicity concerns.

On the other hand, proximity to a muslim majority state/nation meant that over time, any immigration could - and was - now also be viewed through a communal lens.

## Further Tensions

- Ethnic tensions spread to beyond Assamese Identity
- People of plains vs people of hills - the tribal dispute
- Bodo, etc. Switching languages as well.
- Non consideration in the traditional discourse; clubbing it under a singular “assamese identity”