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Assam Problem: A Historical Perspective and Current Challenges

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Abstract

Assam, a picturesque state nestled in the northeastern region of India, has grappled with various socio-political issues collectively known as the "Assam Problem." Rooted in complex historical and demographic factors, the Assam Problem revolves around issues such as illegal immigration, ethnic tensions, and the preservation of indigenous cultures. This article delves into the historical background of the Assam Problem, its multifaceted dimensions, and the steps taken by the government and civil society to find lasting solutions. To shed light on the subject, various academic sources and reports will be referenced.

Key words- NRC, CAA, BTAD, AASU.

Introduction

Assam's history is rich and diverse, with traces of its civilization dating back to ancient times. It was ruled by various indigenous dynasties and experienced the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism over centuries. The region's distinct identity further solidified during the Ahom Kingdom's rule, which lasted for six centuries until British colonization in the early 19th century. The colonial era marked a significant turning point in Assam's history. British rule saw the influx of tea plantations and the migration of workers from various parts of India, primarily Bengal and Bihar, leading to demographic changes in the region. The colonial administration's policies resulted in land dispossession and cultural dislocation for many indigenous communities, creating a sense of insecurity among the Assamese people.

1. Historical Context and Immigration Issues

The Assam Problem can be traced back to the colonial era when the British annexed the region in the early 19th century. The British administration encouraged large-scale migration from other parts of India to Assam to promote tea cultivation and other economic activities. Consequently, this led to significant demographic changes and altered the socio-cultural landscape of the region. (Baruah, 2005) People in Assam who were adamantly opposed to the presence of illegal immigrants in the state engaged in a protracted popular rebellion between 1979 and 1985. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU), under the direction of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, was largely responsible for leading the movement. In order to create a political alternative to the in power Indian National Congress (Congress Party), the AASU worked with others in the formation of the AGP after an agreement with the central government was reached in 1985

that immigrants arriving after 1971 would be subject to deportation. The AGP had its first taste of success at the state level. The Assam legislative assembly elections were held in December 1985, but the party did not yet have a registration, therefore its candidates ran as independents. In the 126-member assembly, they obtained the majority of seats and established a government. Mahanta, who had been named party president, was now in charge of the administration as chief minister. However, it was difficult for student leaders who had participated in agitations to transition into ministers who could handle successful administration. During the AGP's first term in administration, the militant separatist group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), whose violent operations had sharply grown in the state since the AGP came to power, was accused of receiving a free hand and, more importantly, of corruption. In 1990, New Delhi overthrew the Assam administration and imposed central rule after evidence of close ties between AGP ministers and the ULFA surfaced. (Routray, n.d.) The AGP had internal strife after losing its position of authority, which led to the organization's disintegration in 1991. Some members established a "new" AGP under the leadership of Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, the home minister in the former AGP administration. In the 1991 assembly elections, the major party did poorly, winning only 19 seats. The Congress Party won 66 seats and established an administration. Following their reunion, the two AGP sections managed to make a comeback in the 1996 assembly elections, boosting their combined number of seats to 59. The party ran on a platform supporting the right to self-determination and increased state autonomy. With the aid of socialist parties, it established a cabinet, with Mahanta once more serving as chief minister. However, the party's performance during its second term in office was nearly identical to that of its first. It became caught up in a corruption controversy involving phony letters of credit and was only saved from prosecution by the involvement of the governor of Assam, who wouldn't allow law enforcement agents to look into the allegations. When dealing with the ULFA, the AGP administration originally adopted a lenient stance. Later, it reversed its stance and launched a covert operation to assassinate ULFA leaders' family members by enlisting former ULFA militants who had turned themselves in to the police. When the proposal was made public, there was a huge backlash against the party. Despite its alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the AGP was only able to gain 20 seats in the state assembly in 2001. The AGP failed to win a single seat in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections; only two of the party's candidates were elected in the 2004 polls; and just one won in the 2009 contest. The party again did not elect a candidate to the Lok Sabha in 2014. (Routray, n.d.)

2.The National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

One of the most contentious issues in recent times has been the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. The NRC aimed to identify Indian citizens and weed out illegal immigrants, but it resulted in considerable social anxiety and unrest. Additionally, the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 further heightened tensions as it offered citizenship to persecuted non-Muslim minorities from neighbouring countries, raising concerns about the potential impact on Assam's indigenous communities. (Biswas, 2020) Large-scale irregularities have been found by India's Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in the process of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for Assam. Since the CAG report formally states that "the intended objective of preparing a valid, error-free NRC has not been met," it effectively rings the death knell for the NRC effort. The Assam legislature received the CAG report on December 23, 2022 which supports the chief minister's statement to India Today NE that the NRC list was inaccurate. He flatly attributed the inconsistencies to Prateek Hajela, an IAS officer who served as the NRC state coordinator at the time. The Registrar General of India (RGI) has neglected to notify the NRC list three years after it was published. Those who were excluded by the NRC are

nevertheless considered to be full citizens of India and are still eligible to vote. Nearly all parties involved, including Assam Public Works (APW), the NGO that asked the Supreme Court to update the 1951 NRC, have rejected the list as of late. The NRC list, according to the Assam BJP government, contained numerous errors and left out eligible citizens while including illegal immigrants. (Deka, 2023). Since then, the Assam government has asked the Supreme Court to review the entire exercise. The list has also been rejected by a number of regional groups and organizations, including the APW, who have petitioned the Supreme Court for review. The apex court is currently considering the petitions.

3. Ethnic Tensions and Insurgency

Assam's diverse ethnic composition has often led to clashes between different communities. Insurgent groups seeking autonomy or secession from India have emerged, leading to violence and instability in the region. These groups claim to represent the interests of various ethnic communities and demand protection of their rights. (Hussain, 2001). Due to its complicated social structure, which is made up of many different ethnic groups, Assam has occasionally experienced numerous social unrests and instability in the form of inter-ethnic wars. The Nellie Massacre between Assamese (mostly Tiwas and Lalungs, classified as Scheduled Tribe [plain]) and Bengali-speaking immigrants, Bodo and non-Bodos in the areas of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), as well as the Karbi and Dimasa conflicts in the Karbi Anglong and N. C. Hills District, are noteworthy among them. On February 18, 1983, the infamous Nellie Massacre occurred for almost six hours. In the undivided Nagaon region of Central Assam, armed mobs (ethnic Assamese) allegedly slaughtered up to 1,800 Muslims (unofficial claims: 3,300) throughout 14 villages under the pretense that they were undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh. (Rai, 2023) Another significant instance is the ethnic violence in the BTC between Bodos and non-Bodos. In the late 1990s and most recently in 2014, the aforementioned region had witnessed violent interethnic conflicts with significant casualties between Bodos and Adivasis (mostly Central Indian tribes like Santhal, Munda, and others who were recruited by the British to work on the Tea Estates). Also noteworthy are the conflicts between Muslims and Bodos in the years 2008 and 2012.

4. Measures for Conflict Resolution

To address the Assam Problem, the Indian government has undertaken several initiatives. One notable step was the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which sought to identify and deport illegal immigrants while providing safeguards for the cultural, linguistic, and economic interests of the indigenous communities. (Bezboruah, 1991) The Assam Accord (1985) was a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) that was signed in New Delhi on August 15, 1985, between representatives of the Indian government and the Assam movement. The agreement put an end to the Assam Agitation and made it possible for its leaders to quickly establish a political party and form the state of Assam's administration. Some of the main demands included: Full citizenship, including the opportunity to vote, for all foreigners who entered Assam between 1951 and 1961. All those who entered between 1961 and 1971 were to be granted full citizenship, with the exception of the right to vote, which would be suspended for ten years. Those who entered after 1971 would be expelled. A rival plan for Assam's economic development that included a second oil refinery, a paper mill, and a technical institute was also developed. Additionally, the federal government committed to establishing "legislative and administrative safeguards to protect the Assamese people's cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage." Although the pact put a stop to the uprising, some of its essential provisions have not yet been put into effect, which has allowed some problems to persist. (Assam Accord 1985, 2017)

Conclusion

The Assam problem remains a complex and sensitive issue, intertwined with historical, demographic, and political complexities. Addressing the challenges of illegal immigration, ethnic tensions, and insurgency requires a comprehensive and empathetic approach. Finding lasting solutions demands a delicate balance between protecting the rights of indigenous communities and ensuring humanitarian considerations for vulnerable populations. It is essential for policymakers, academics, and civil society to engage in constructive dialogue, drawing insights from historical research and expert opinions. By fostering an inclusive and participatory process, we can hope to navigate through the intricacies of the Assam Problem and work towards a harmonious and prosperous future for the region.

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