

Decline of the Indigenous People and Growing Tensions in Assam

The recent disturbances in Kokrajhar and Dhubri districts of Assam have once again brought the issue of large-scale immigration of Muslims from Bangladesh into sharp focus. The immigration has continued for so long and in such large numbers that the indigenous Hindu populations have become a minority in several districts, and in numerous *taluks*, there are hardly any indigenous Hindus left. The situation has become so intolerable that normally reticent constitutional authorities – like the Election Commissioner of India, Sri Harishankar Brahma – have been forced to make their apprehensions public. And even committed secular scholars have been constrained to recognize the reality of the drastically changed religious demography of the region and the uncontrollable passions it has the potential to unleash. But there have also been attempts in some mainstream papers, especially in the articles by Banajit Hussain in the *Hindu* of August 8 and Nilim Dutta in the *Indian Express* of August 3, to whitewash the facts through presentation of curiously manipulated and selective census data. These articles are intended to especially counter Mr. Brahma's devastating analysis and to suggest that he does not know his numbers.

The phenomenon of the immigration of Bengali speaking Muslims into lower Assam is so blatant, and so large that it is impossible to hide it from the data. The fact stands out conspicuously in all census data since 1901, when the British started deliberately settling Bengali Muslims, especially from the East Bengal district of Mymensingh, in the lower Assam districts of Brahmaputra valley. As a consequence, the proportion of Muslims in Assam rose from 15 percent in 1901 to 25 percent in 1951. The number of Muslims in the state in this period rose from less than 5 lakhs in 1901 to nearly 20 lakhs in 1951. Population of Hindus in Assam in that period had only doubled, from about 29 lakhs to 59 lakhs. Even the latter figure is high compared to the average growth of population in India during that period, which indicates some migration of Hindus also.

If during 1901-1951, the Muslims of Assam had grown at the same rate as in the rest of undivided India in this period, then there should have been only about 8 lakh Muslims in Assam in 1951, as against 20 lakhs that were counted in the census. These 12 lakh excess Muslims represent the numbers that had entered Assam during 1901-1951 and their descendants. It is claimed that since these persons had come into Assam, when India was still united and therefore are legitimate citizens. This, of course, is true; but the truth is no consolation for the indigenous populations who were forced to share their limited natural resources and space with outsiders brought in or allowed to settle by an alien government. It should be remembered that the incoming Muslims had settled in a small area of Assam. Of about 20 lakh Muslims counted in 1951, 16 lakhs were in the then undivided four districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon. Proportion of Muslims in these four districts together increased from less than 13 percent in 1901 to nearly 33 percent in 1951.

But the in-migration of Muslims from East Bengal did not stop with Independence and Partition. The number of Muslims in Assam has increased from about 20 lakhs in 1951 to 82 lakhs in 2001. Thus their numbers quadrupled in the period from 1901 to 1951, and again from 1951 to 2001.

If the Muslims of Assam had grown at the same rate as the average population growth of the country, then there would have been just about 56 lakh Muslims there in 2001 and if they had grown at the much higher rate of Muslims in the country, then also there would have been only about 72 lakh Muslims in Assam. Thus there is a clear excess of at least 10 lakh Muslims and perhaps of around 20 lakh Muslims in Assam, which can be attributed only to immigration from outside the country. As a consequence, the proportion of Muslims in lower Assam has increased to 40 percent; their proportion in undivided Goalpara district in 2001 is more than 51 percent and in Dhubri component of it, it is nearly 75 percent.

In the last two decades, along with the immigration of Muslims from outside, another factor has begun affecting the religious demography of Assam. The rate of growth of communities other than Muslims and Christians has started falling steeply. In 2001, in at least 6 districts of Assam, Hindus registered a decadal growth of less than 10 percent, while Muslims and also Christians grew at much higher rates. The table below, giving the data for all component districts of lower Assam tells its own story.

Table 1: Decadal Growth of Lower Assam, 1991-2001 (in percent)				
District	Total	Hindu	Muslims	Christians
Bongaigaon	12.05	2.35	31.84	4.68
Dhubri	22.92	5.90	29.58	65.5
Kokrajhar	13.12	5.24	19.15	58.12
Barpeta	18.85	9.67	25.86	48.03
Nalbari	13.03	9.19	25.23	68.29
Darrang	15.81	8.81	28.74	18.74
Goalpara	23.04	12.78	31.68	22.59
Kamrup	26.12	23.48	33.69	39.09
Sonitpur	18.08	12.98	41.17	35.34
Nagaon	22.27	13.10	32.12	36.77
Marigaon	21.35	16.11	27.47	416.33
Total of Above	19.58	12.45	29.85	35.44

The excessively low growth of Hindus in the first six districts in the Table above cannot be natural and indicates some level of expulsion of Hindus from these districts. In fact, as seen in the Table below, there are at least 8 taluks of these districts which recorded negative Hindu growth during 1991-2001. This reduction in numbers could only be possible, if large numbers of indigenous families from these taluks were forced to move out. It is unfortunate that though the indications of such an expulsion of Hindus have been available at least since 2004, when the religious demographic data of the 2001, we

have made no enquire about the unfortunate people who have been thus forced to abandon their homes in Independent India.

Table 2: Taluks with negative growth of Hindus during 1991-2001

District	Tahsil		1991	2001	Growth
Kokrajhar	Bhowraguri	Hindu	27,526	27,501	-0.09
		Muslim	30,452	38,365	25.99
Kokrajhar	Dotoma	Hindu	117,553	98,929	-15.84
		Muslim	24,544	30,892	25.86
Dhubri	Bagribari	Hindu	32,614	31,273	-4.11
		Muslim	97,114	126,699	30.46
Dhubri	Chapar	Hindu	50,255	49,165	-2.17
		Muslim	55,787	76,643	37.39
Dhubri	South Salmara	Hindu	5,557	4,271	-23.14
		Muslim	161,952	195,456	20.69
Bongaigaon	Bijni	Hindu	222,132	201,744	-9.18
		Muslim	81,600	105,047	28.73
Barpeta	Kalgachia	Hindu	3,187	1,632	-48.79
		Muslim	121,431	146,516	20.66
Barpeta	Baghbor	Hindu	14,112	11,028	-21.85
		Muslim	231,242	284,251	22.92

Religious demographic data for the count of 2011 has not yet been released. But, there are already indications that several districts of Assam have shown a very low rate of growth, while Muslim dominant districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nagaon and Marigaon in lower Assam, and also Hailakandi in Cachar, have grown at a much higher rate than the average of the state. Dhubri, the district with highest percentage of Muslims in 2001, has also recorded the highest growth of all districts in 2011 at 24.40 percent compared to the state average of less than 17 percent. The process of demographic change and of the marginalisation of Hindus in Assam has not yet abated.

Assam may be the worst example of drastic religious demographic change leading to extreme tensions in the society. But, the problem is not confined to Assam alone. There are several large regions and limited pockets which are facing similar change and tensions. The nation can hardly afford to ignore the problem any longer.

Note: For detailed data on the Religious Demography of Assam, see, *Religious Demography of India* (2003) and the *2011 Revision* (2005) published by the Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai.

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