



## Understanding the Citizenship Narrative of the Bengali Hindus in Assam

Dr. Moushumi Dutta Pathak

Associate Prof.  
Department of History  
Arya Vidyapeeth College

### Abstract

To define Citizenship as the historian Romila Thapar points out is the relationship between the individual and the State wherein the citizen owes allegiance and they perform some agreed upon duties and in return the state has to protect them in various ways. The Citizenship question has always remained a point of debate as where the migrants and immigrants to any region were concerned.

Assam has been a land of migrants because of its typical geographical location. Various groups of people of diverse background have entered the region at various point of time. It was only a matter of space and time of their migration wherein their identity vis-à-vis the state can be understood. Amongst all group of migrants, the Bengali Hindus into Assam are the most significant to have entered into Assam at different phases within the paradigm of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. Their arrival had far-reaching implication upon the state and society. Understandably, within the politics of their migration was also associated the question of citizenship. This has led to the evolution of a historiographical narrative of the issue.

My paper proposes to look into the narrative of citizenship around this issue and also to understand the broad parameters of the society and the middle class intelligentsia's reaction throughout the historical period to contemporary times.

Received 14 Mar., 2023; Revised 27 Mar., 2023; Accepted 29 Mar., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.  
Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### I. Introduction

Assam has been a land of migrants because of its typical geographical location. Various groups of people of diverse background have entered the region at various point of time. It was only a matter of space and time of their migration wherein their identity vis-à-vis the state can be understood. Historian H .K. Barpujari attributes the geographical location of Assam to be the prime factor responsible for the migration of various groups from different directions to Assam since the ancient period. In the Introduction of his book titled *The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol. 1*, Barpujari had mentioned the different connecting routes that linked Assam with the neighbouring countries such as the Assam-Burma route and the Patkai route. These routes were responsible for the coming of the various racial elements from South-East Asia, the Ahoms and other Tibeto-Burmans from the north-east. The hill passes of Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal were also probably used by certain waves of the Tibeto-Burman migrants. On the west, the valleys of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra were used by the Indo-Aryans to penetrate into *Pragjyotish-Kamarupa*. Thus 'Assam being located in one of the great migration routes of mankind' these migrants successfully entered the region to contribute to the moulding of the culture and ethnic composition of the people of the region (Barpujari ed. 1990:2-3).

Amongst all group of migrants, the Bengali Hindus into Assam are the most significant to have entered into Assam at different phases within the paradigm of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. Their arrival had far-reaching implication upon the state and society. Understandably, within the politics of their migration and settlement was also associated the question of their citizenship. This has led to the evolution of a historiographical narrative of the issue.

### State-sponsored Bengali-Hindu migration in pre-colonial , colonial and post-colonial period

The gradual Hinduisation of the Ahom Kings in Assam impelled them to invite high caste Hindus from geographically adjacent Bengal so as to strengthen their newly adopted system. Such migration gained

momentum during the reign of the Ahom King Pratap Singha (Hussain 1993:27). Successive Ahom Kings Rudra Singha (1696-1740) and his son Siva Singha (1741-1744) patronised the migration of Bengali priests. In this context could be mentioned Krishnaram Bhattacharjee, a Saivaite priest from the neighbouring district of Nabwadip in Bengal to be placed at the *Kamakshya* temple at the Nilachal Hills. Large land grants were made to the priest, which are being occupied by his successors till today (Barpujari 1987:35). These Bengali priests who migrated to Assam under the royal patronage contributed to the *sanskritizing* and *brahmanizing* of the non-caste Assamese like the Ahoms (Hussain 1993: 228). The promotion of Bengali migration into the Brahmaputra Valley, could be historically therefore looked back to the days of Ancient Assam when the kings of Kamrup gave over land grants to the Brahmins of the neighbouring areas. The Silimpur inscription, dates to the close of the eleventh century A.D. mentions of King Jayapala's grant to a Brahmin of North Bengal or Pundravardhana, land to the value of 900 to 1000 gold coins (Epigraphia Indica XIII: 289 cited in Barpujari 1987:34; Barpujari ed.1990:161). Various other inscriptions of the period, like the Dubi and Nidhanpur Copper Plate records land grants to Brahmins of Sravasti and Varendri of Bengal.

Following the British annexation of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1826, the process of gradual incorporation of the hills and plains of the north-eastern region started. It took more than a century for the colonial administrators to bring all the areas of the region under the British Indian politico-economic and administrative system. The colonial province of Assam significantly was larger and heterogeneous than the pre-colonial days. Unlike the pre-colonial Ahom kingdom that consisted of the Brahmaputra Valley alone, the traditional homeland of the Assamese speaking population, the colonial province embraced almost all of the north-east as we know it now, including the Bengali-speaking districts of Cachar, Sylhet, Goalpara and the hills of the Nagas, Khasis, Lushais, Garos and Jaintiyas (Dasgupta 2001A:35). However, with the incorporation of the Brahmaputra Valley into the colonial British Indian Empire, the region was gradually moulded in the colonial interest that aimed at opening up its insular economy. The fundamental intention of the colonialists lay in channelizing the resources of the region to suit their economic interest. Colonial officials perceiving the need of maximising the revenue growth of the region for economic purpose felt that the land abundant economy of Assam was a fertile pasture to welcome migrants to the region. The erstwhile, uninhabited land frontier was made to be gradually attracted by both labour and enterprise from the neighbouring province of the *Raj*, to meet the economic demands of the 'infant' colonial administration. All this happened basically in the interest of colonialism (Hussain 1993:221). Even the Assamese middle class that correspondingly emerged in colonial Assam initially welcomed migration. Assamese Renaissance that grew under the impact of Bengal Renaissance and colonial patronage, had torchbearers like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Bolinarayan Bora etc. They through their pleas and memorandums implored the British government for the promotion of migration for the economic progress of the province i.e. Assam (Guha 1988: 68; Nag 1990: 87).

The independence of India in 1947 was accompanied by Partition. The decision of the colonial government for granting freedom with the division of the country on communal considerations had led to the creation of the two states of India and Pakistan. It consequently divided the provinces of Punjab and Bengal. The division of Bengal resulted in the formation of East Pakistan, that was to remain within Muslim majority Pakistan and West Bengal as a part of independent India. The Bengal Boundary Commission of Sir Cyril Radcliffe besides demarcating the territories to constitute the two dominions brought in the Sylhet Referendum which was to decide the fate of this district of Assam. Sylhet, historically an integral part of Bengal, ultimately chose to be with East Pakistan except four of its *thanas* remaining in India which was amalgamated with the district of Cachar in the Surma Valley of Assam. The newly drawn boundaries decided the fate of many who were affected by this separation. This vivisection led to a communal rage on either side of the border that forcibly shook the religious minorities from their roots to be compelled to look for a 'safer' abode. Needless to say that most of the refugees into Assam from East Pakistan were Bengali Hindus - the persecuted religious minority in Islamic Pakistan ruled by modern and politicised armed forces. The Partition made their position extremely vulnerable. The threat to their existence with dignity both actual and under perception, propelled their movement across the border (Hussain 1995: 124).

Meghna Guhathakurta, a scholar of International Relations, arguing on the character of migration that has taken place across the Bengal borders in 1947 has stated that a tendency among historians was to generally focus on the violent nature of Partition in the Punjab and the mass exodus that followed to result in forced or involuntary migration (Guhathakurta 2002:54-58). Though, migration along the Bengal border reflected a different situation that had a 'conscious choice and option' associated with the migrants, yet no one could deny the violent and communal underbelly of the Bengal Partition. Violence typifies a state where a sense of fear is generated and perpetrated in such a way as to make it systematic, pervasive and inevitable (Guhathakurta 2003:96-105). In the many communal riots, which both preceded and followed the Partition in East Bengal or East Pakistan, it was the fear of being persecuted and dispossessed, rather than actual incidents of violence that forced many to flee. Fear is less derived from actual acts of violence than it is from perceptions of violence. In the interviews resurrected of the Bengali Hindus in the Brahmaputra Valley from East Bengal/East Pakistan in

the wake of Partition-riots, one comes across a majority who say that they did not witness any actual violence but came over because their neighbours had left the country considering it to be no longer their own. Another point that came to be reflected through the interviews conducted among the displaced was their sense of nostalgia in being dispossessed of their homestead, which accounts to their involuntary movements.

There were two categories among the displaced Bengali Hindus who migrated from East Bengal/East Pakistan in the aftermath of the Partition of 1947. One was the upper classes of the Bengali Hindus who in order to preserve their honour and search for security in trouble-torn East Bengal, decided to migrate from the land of birth. They were identified as the Bengali *bhadrolok* refugee migration. The other was the low caste refugees, mainly the peasants who confronted economic constraints with the migration of the upper class. This was because their livelihood was interwoven with the higher classes. They therefore followed the *bhadrolok* refugees.

**Table:1**  
**Arrival of Partition Migrants / Displaced Persons / Refugees in Assam**  
**year by year**

From	Year	Numbers
East Bengal	1946	6,800
East Pakistan	1947	42,346
''''''	1948	41,740
''''''	1950	144,512
'''''' (January & February)	1951	3,479
	Total	272,075
West Pakistan		647
District origin not known		1,733
Grand Total		274,455

Source: Census of India 1951A: 364.

The Table 1 accounts to the number of arrivals of displaced population each successive year since 1946. The records of migration shown in table 8 is up till 1951; beginning with the migration of people following the Noakhali riots of 1946 till the conclusion of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950.

**Table:2**  
**Total Number of Hindu Refugee Population in Assam 1951-1971**

1951	-----	2,74,455
1958	-----	4,87,000
1961	-----	6,00,000
1968	-----	10,68,455
1971-72	-----	15,00,000

Source: Nag 1990: Appendix-C.

Table 2 provides the statistics of the total Hindu refugee population from East Pakistan into Assam from 1951 to the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971.

### Conceptualising terms

With the creation of the two nation-states in 1947, in the aftermath of independence and Partition of the sub-continent, a large flow of population took place across the borders in search of security. This brought in the use of terms like displaced and refugees in Partition historiography. Such terms need to be conceptualised for understanding the study of post-Partition displacement. Refugees were identified as *sharanarathi* and *udbastu* on the western side of the Bengal border that remained within India since 1947. In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, in common parlance, these groups of people who were forced to migrate under circumstances of uncertainty and despair came to be called 'refugees' or in Assamese as the *bhaganiya*. The term was later replaced by 'displaced persons', a stigma that the Bengali Hindus were still made to carry with in north-east India.

The Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam in the Statistical Survey of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan to Assam in the year 1955-56 defined, a 'displaced person' or 'refugee' or 'migrant' from East Pakistan as who was ordinarily a resident in the territories now comprised in East Pakistan, but who on account of civil disturbances or on account of the Partition of India has migrated –

a) in the case of persons migrated from the district of Noakhali or the district of Comilla now forming part of East Pakistan, on or after the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1946 and

b) in the case of persons migrating from any other area in East Pakistan, on or after the 1st June, 1947 to the territories now included in Assam with the intention of taking up permanent residence. A person to be enumerated as displaced had to satisfy three conditions. Firstly, he must have been ordinarily a resident of the territories now under East Pakistan; secondly, he must have physically migrated on account of Partition or communal disturbances or fear of such disturbances on or after certain material dates and thirdly in order to eliminate temporary flying migrants and also those who casually smuggle into and out of the territories of Assam, it was also laid down that the person must satisfy as to his intention of taking up permanent residence in Assam (Government of Assam 1958A :1).

The term refugee is derived from the Latin word 'fugere', which means to flee for safety. Longman's Family Dictionary defines refugee as a person who owing to religious persecution or political troubles seeks refuge in a foreign country. By this definition, a refugee loses his state's connection and protection, and as such is in search of the substitute protection of another state or international community (Chhangani 1995:476-482). In conceptualising the definition of a refugee and displaced, comparisons with other concepts like a migrant or an internally displaced person becomes necessary. A refugee is an involuntary or forced migrant (Mathur 1999:7). The refugees in question distinguish themselves from ordinary alien or usual migrant groups because they have been forced out of their territory of regular residence by virtue of political developments and not due to incentives like economic conditions or economic attraction to another territory. A migrant is one who leaves his home for opportunity while a refugee does so out of fear; a migrant travels to escape stagnation and poverty while a refugee travels to escape persecution, conflict and perhaps death; a migrant seeks opportunity while a refugee seeks haven; a migrant does not 'wish' to return home – a refugee cannot 'dare' (Mathur 1999:8).

Refugee flows are identified as population displacements across international borders. So, a refugee is one who is externally displaced i.e. who seeks asylum in another state while an internally displaced person is dislocated from his original habitat and shifted to another site, which is however within the same state. Thus the definition of refugee remains a topic of continuous debate with overlapping connotations. In International law, a 'refugee' is a person who is forced to leave home for certain specified reasons. So the basic requisite of a refugee are –

- a) They are outside the country of origin/ nationality.
- b) They are unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country or to return there.
- c) Such inability or unwillingness is caused by a well-founded fear of being persecuted and
- d) The persecution feared is based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (Goswami 2006:40).

In International law therefore, which is based on the principle of respect for sovereignty of states, only those who have lost the protection of their home states and as a result have crossed international borders to seek refuge in another country are accepted as refugees, as these are stateless people. Thus in conclusion it can be said that states are exclusive agencies of protecting the 'Rights of Man' and whenever any home state fails to do so the only alternative left is to seek the protection of another state.

The definition of refugee according to the Art. 1(A)(2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugee is a person "*who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return* (UNHCR undated:1).

But there was a different issue associated in so far as the displaced population from East Bengal were concerned. A forced movement of population results invariably in loss of citizenship to the refugees, yet in the case of East Bengal displaced, there was certainly no question of granting them new nationality. They could be said to simply move away from the troubled spots in East Bengal to join their co-religionists, blood relatives and inmates. Truly speaking, they were no refugees but were displaced people from one socio-political environment to another within the same state (Pakrasi 1971:50). According to them, the question of crossing international border did not arise because the sub-continent was not Partitioned at that point of time. Therefore, on an analysis of the events around the time, the line of distinction is said to marginally exist between a 'refugee', 'displaced' and an internally displaced person. The East Bengal population that moved into the Brahmaputra Valley with independence were refugees in the sense of losing their home out of fear. They were displaced because they fall within the purview of definition of displaced person as stated by the government. But in identifying the status of this group of people, these displaced from East Bengal/ East Pakistan could be argued to be internally displaced persons because of the reason of their forced population movement to have taken place within the same country. The line that deemed to have partitioned the nation-state was both arbitrarily drawn across and reluctantly recognized as a form of division.

### **Post-partition Imbrolio**

The question of who was indigenous and who was not, evolved with the Passport system that came to be introduced in the post-partition period of 1947. Romila Thapar in her paper “Citizenship: The Right to be a citizen” speaks of the Partition of 1947 as the link to the coming of Citizenship (Thapar 2021:17). Political Scientist Niraja Gopal Jayal notes in an incisive critical study of Indian Citizenship and its discontents that ‘India might have awakened to life and freedom at the stroke of the midnight hour in August 1947 but 365 millions of subjects of King George VI were not magically turned into citizens as that midnight hour struck’ - and thereby hangs a complicated and chequered tale (Jayal 2013:53) began.

In 1947, a debate arose on the status of indigenous people of Assam and their position in the Indian nation-state keeping in mind the large-scale migration that took place during post partition period. It was full five years after the creation of the republic of India that the Citizenship Act of 1955 came to be enacted (ibid:63). The first law of Citizenship defined five ways of conferring citizenship-by birth, naturalisation, descent, registration and incorporation of territory. A series of debates and discussions took place in the Indian Parliament on the recognition and inclusion of refugees in the proposed Citizenship Act (Mahanta 2021: 198). Some members raised objections to the provision of registration procedure; they urged the automatic conferment of citizenship to the refugees. Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava protested in the Rajya Sabha against any financial obligations shouldered on the part of the refugees (Rajya Sabha Debates, Vol II (Discussion on the Citizenship of refugees) 7<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> December, 1955). He wondered that whether the government expected that the 3 million refugees who had come in the past 5 years were ready to spend Rs 5-10 lakhs for making affidavits, going to courts and putting stamps to acquire the citizenship status (Mahanta: ibid). In 1964, Shastri ji made the Foreigners (Tribunal) Order 1964 under Foreigners Act 1946 under which foreign tribunals were created and non citizens were to be evacuated. In 1965, post the Indo-Pak war, more people from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) came to Assam. Further, in 1971, East Pakistan was given independence. From around March to December, 1 crore people came from East Pakistan to India. In 1972, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared that all those Bangladeshis who had come to India after 25/3/1971 would not be given Indian citizenship and would be taken back by Pakistan. On 15<sup>th</sup> August 1985, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, in an attempt to assuage the movement brought in the Assam Accord. The Accord provided that all the immigrants into Assam before 1<sup>st</sup> January 1966 would be legal migrants and would be given citizenship. All the immigrants between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1966 and 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 had to register under the Foreigners Registration Act 1939. It was provided that post registration these people would be given all the rights of a citizen, but they would not be granted voting rights for 10 years. All the immigrants post 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 would be detained, their names deleted from electoral roll and deported on grounds of the international pact between Bangladesh and India.

Udayan Misra in his book “Burden of History- Assam and the Partition unresolved issues (Misra 17:158) cites comments in the Assam tribune in its editorial viz. Bangladeshi Infiltration on the question of granting of citizenship to Hindu refugees (Assam Tribune dated 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2014). ....”if all Hindu refugees are to be accepted, the burden should be shared by the other states and not Assam which has already borne the brunt of cross-border influx. The same feeling had been shared for the Bengali Hindu refugees immediately after the post-partition period where Assam got entangled in an argument with the Centre regarding the rehabilitation of the refugees.

Section 6A was a special provision inserted into the 1955 Act in furtherance of a Memorandum of Settlement called the ‘Assam Accord’ signed on August 15, 1985 by the then Rajiv Gandhi government with the leaders of the Assam Movement to preserve and protect the Assamese culture, heritage, linguistic and social identity. The Accord came at the end of a six-year-long agitation by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) to identify and deport illegal immigrants, mostly from neighbouring Bangladesh, from the State. Under Section 6A, foreigners who had entered Assam before January 1, 1966, and been “ordinarily resident” in the State, would have all the rights and obligations of Indian citizens. Those who had entered the State between January 1, 1966 and March 25, 1971 would have the same rights and obligations except that they would not be able to vote for 10 years.

It is being contended that CAA, 2019 has been brought in not to dilute the objective of the Assam Accord but to remedy the defects that existed in the latter. However, given the extremely fragile and sensitive condition of the almost extinct Assamese culture, it only makes sense that the date mentioned in the Assam Accord is not further extended to 2014. The developments that have taken place after 1971 must be meted out a different treatment and accommodated while taking into consideration the impossibility of bringing any more migrants into Assam. Legal protection of land, culture and political rights has been the long-standing demand of Assamese people and must be acceded to with utmost priority.

The Section 2 of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 1955 reads as: “Provided that any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, who entered into India on or before the 31st day of December, 2014 and who has been exempted by the Central

Government by or under clause (c) of sub-section (2) of section 3 of the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 or from the application of the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 or any rule or order made thereunder, shall not be treated as illegal migrant for the purposes of this Act.”

The NRC enumeration of 1951 was a hurried one, having been completed between 9<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> February of the same year. Within a span of 20 days such a large volume of citizen register was prepared. There were gross anomalies and irregularities. Most unfortunately, no indication was given to the people of the terrible consequences that they would have to face at a future date, if their names were not included in the NRC of 1951 (Ghoshal 2021:250-251). The inevitable happened. With the process of upgradation of the NRC, which became an indispensable tool to prove someone’s citizenship, in the next phase large number were identified as illegal immigrants and were therefore made to languish in jails converted to ‘detention centres’ in different parts of Assam. The single option that was left to them against non-inclusion was an appeal to a State level Foreigner’s tribunal or else be repatriated (Ghoshal 2021:ibid). The NRC is being updated in Assam with March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date and 19.06 Lakh applicants were left out of its final list. According to Assam minister Hemanta Biswa Sarma, 5.42 lakh people in Assam would benefit from the Citizenship amended law. The amended law seeks to allow Hindus and other non-Muslim migrants who fled Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan and migrated to India till December 31, 2014, after a stay of five years. This, however, triggered massive protests in most parts of Assam and rest of the northeast as indigenous people fear that the amendment would reduce them into minorities by giving citizenship to a large number of Hindu Bengali migrants from Bangladesh. Secondly, during the NRC exercise, applicants had to go through a rigorous verification process that included office verification for validating the documents submitted to support residency claim and field verification for identifying applicants and authenticating their claims. Altogether, 49.42 lakh Letters of Information were generated centrally using software wherein all the “conflicting descendants spread across NRC Seva Kendras, Circles, Districts and States” were asked to appear before an Investigating Officer on a specific date and time at a specified venue. However, the verification venues were located far away from the residences of most of the applicants who were asked to appear for family tree verification and special verification. Many families had to sell their livestock or other belongings to meet the travel and accommodation expenses to appear at the hearings.

Alleging that the final NRC list was full of errors, Bijan Mahajan, the Assam BJP spokesperson and senior Gauhati High Court advocate, said that the remedial measures lay either in the court of law or in the legislative domain. “Undoubtedly, the errors are so many, the quantum is so huge, the best option is to seek remedy in the legislative domain,” he added.

The legal validity of the final NRC list is critical to ending the arbitrary referring of names to Foreigners Tribunals by the border wing of the Assam Police and ending the trauma of lakhs of persons who have carried the “suspected foreigner” tag for decades.

In February this year, Assam Parliamentary Affairs and Transport Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary informed the Assam Assembly that between 1985 and August 2018, a total of 6,26,793 persons had been referred to Foreigners Tribunals after cases of being “suspected foreigners” were registered against them. The Foreigners Tribunals declared 1,08,815 of them as Indians and 1,03,764 as foreigners.

### **Present-day scenario**

Against this backdrop news items try to testify the plight of this so called ‘illegal migrants’ of the Hindu population:

For These Hindu Migrants from Bangladesh, India Proves a Bridge Too Far: **Unomati Biswas and her son crossed into India hoping to live with honour but** what they faced was deception. And despite Modi’s promises of citizenship, they were dogged by court cases before eventually going back home. (The Print)

Arjun Namasudra, a Hindu Bengali in Assam, died by suicide in 2012 after he was asked by the Foreigners’ Tribunal to prove his Indian citizenship in spite of having a citizenship card on his father’s name by the Government of India. After a decade, Arjun’s mother, Akol Rani has been served the same notice. She has been asked to prove her citizenship and give a written statement in court with all her documents (Apr 3, 2022 The Quint) CAA : Many Hindu Bengalis in Assam are Waiting for Indian Citizenship | The Quint-The Citizenship (Amendment) Act hasn’t been implemented since the rules are yet to be framed and notified. Though there are no official figures, it’s estimated that almost 5.56 lakh Hindus are out of the Assam NRC, many of them Bengali Hindus. A lot of them are dependent on the CAA for their Indian citizenship. The passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019, on December 10 did not please Bapi Sarkar, a youth belonging to Hindu Bengali, the community which is at the heart of the controversy regarding the amended citizenship law. This despite the fact that the name of his mother, Shila, was left out of the final list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) released in August this year. The BJP government wants that Hindu Bengalis, who were left out of the NRC to declare themselves as migrants from Bangladesh before applying for citizenship through this amended act. But why will my mother declare herself as a Bangladeshi. Her name was dropped despite submitting a copy of the

passport issued in 1954 in my grandfather's name as a legacy document. We hope her name will be cleared by the foreigner Tribunal. So the government should open the tribunal first instead of pressing the Hindu Bengali left out to apply for citizenship through this act," Sarkar, a resident of Kharupetia in Udalguri district stated (The Wire) { All informations accessed on 14.03.2023 }

The final status of the excluded applicants, after they have exhausted all legal remedies, remains uncertain. Even though the Central government has ruled out declaring the excluded applicants as "stateless" until they exhaust all available legal remedies, the fear of being declared stateless in the event of failure to establish their claim for Indian citizenship in court is going to grip thousands of applicants for a long time.

Amid the controversies over the final NRC list, Union Home Minister Amit Shah assured the Chief Ministers of the north-eastern States at the fourth conclave of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) in Guwahati on September 9 that December 31, 2014, would be the cut-off date for the proposed Citizenship Amendment Bill to be tabled by the government.

"In respect of the Bill, we may need to bring a new version of an amendment to ensure that it does not have an overriding effect on the Inner Line Permit system, existing protections under Article 371 and provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in north-eastern States and other specific State Acts ensuring certain rights specific to the residents of that State," said Himanta Biswa Sarma, the NEDA convener and Assam Chief Minister.

It cannot be considered a "safe haven" to which the Bengali Hindus had migrated from East Bengal/East Pakistan. It had been since pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times that Bengali hindu migration had been taking place into this part of the region. Initially there was a state-sponsored migration but gradually with the emergence of the Assamese middle class there began a community consciousness which became a source of conflict. Amalendu Guha, trying to find out the source of this community- conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalis, probed into the gradual assertive role of the locals (Guha1980:1713). He pointed out that in the early British period; the Bengalis dominated the professions in Assam (ibid.1980:1716). Had there been existent an organised middle class in Assam at that point of time this trend would have met with stiff resistance from this class of people. But the beginning of the British rule saw the total absence of this class. It was only later with the policies followed by the British administration and the changes introduced by them that slowly led to the emergence of new social forces which according to Manorama Sharma had been factors responsible for the emergence of the middle class in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sharma1990:176-209). This emerging class of people was instrumental in instilling an awareness of the sense of deprivation within the Assamese mind in the sphere of language, culture and job-centred conflicts. The employment of the Bengalis came to be considered an attack on the economic rights of the local Assamese (Nag 1990:163). According to Nag, the Assamese had to fight for supremacy with the Bengali on most of the issues and especially the cultural one, to be recognised as a full-fledged nationality, in their drive to nationality formation within the colonial system.

Myron Weiner, an American Political Scientist has very articulately dealt with the idea of the Bengali Hindus being a threat to the Assamese nationality formation in his book *Sons of the Soil* (Weiner 1978:123). Besides looking into the cultural and language issue, he therein lists the major conditions under which competition among communities take place. First, the ethnic division of labour between migrants and non-migrants parallels close relationships that ordinarily have a high conflict potential. Secondly, with the upward educational mobility, the local population sought access to occupations that they previously did not seek or from which they were once excluded. Weiner's argument is that when the local population with education acquired the required acumen to move into the job sector held erstwhile by the migrants, the conflict with the emerging Assamese middle class arose. Even Bipan Chandra had upheld the son of the soil doctrine which seems to have emerged, when there had been an actual or potential competition for industrial and middle class jobs, between the migrants and the local, educated, middle class youth. The friction was relatively more intense in cities where 'outsiders' with greater access to higher education occupied more middle class positions in government service and professions and industry and were engaged in small businesses, small scale industries and shop-keeping (Chandra 2000:220).

## **II. Summary**

It was this similar competition for resources that has resulted in the argument over the Citizenship Amendment Bill to be turned into an Act in 2019. With the CAA enforced, the local middle class intelligentsia perceived it to be a threat to their existence if citizenship be granted to the Bengali Hindu populace. Therefore the protest over the granting of citizenship.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:**

The scholar namely Dr. Moushumi Dutta Pathak is the awardee of ICSSR research projects( Major). This paper is largely an outcome of the Research project sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science

research(ICSSR). However, the responsibility of the facts stated, opinions expressed, and the conclusions drawn is entirely that of the author.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- [1]. Barpujari, H. K. 1990 (ed.) Comprehensive History of Assam Vol.I Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati.
- [2]. 1987 Asamar Navajagaran: Ana Asamiyar Bhumika, Asam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat (in Assamese).
- [3]. Chandra, Bipan 2000 India after Independence 1947-2000, Penguin Books, New Delhi.
- [4]. Chhangani, R. C. 1995Local Integration of Refugees in Nigeria in Journal of the Indian Law Institute, Vol.XXXVII No.4 October-December.
- [5]. Dasgupta, Anindita 2001 Migration, Identity and Conflict in the North East: The Case of Assam, Himalayan and Central Asian Studies, Vol.5 Nos. 3-4.
- [6]. Goswami, Dhristimita 2006 Legal status of Refugees: Indian Position Gauhati Law Times, Vol. I Journal Section.
- [7]. Government of India 1951 Census of India, Vol. XII, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part-IA Report by R. B., Vaghaiwalla, Superintendent Census Operations, Assam, Manipur and Tripura.
- [8]. Government of Assam 1958 Statistical Survey of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan in Assam (Report of the First phase) 1955-56, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam Government Press, Shillong.
- [9]. Ghoshal, Anindita 2021 Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and North-East India, Routledge, New York
- [10]. Guha, Amalendu 1980Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80, Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number, Vol. XV, (October).
- [11]. 1988Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle & Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, People's Publishing House, New Delhi.
- [12]. Guha Thakurtha 2002Uprooted and Divided, Seminar (510) Meghna February.
- [13]. Hussain, Monirul 1993The Assam Movement, Class, Ideology and Identity, Manak Publications, New Delhi.
- [14]. 1995Refugees in the face of emerging Ethnicity in North-East India: An overview in Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences Vol.II, No.1.
- [15]. Jayal, Niraja Gopal 2013 Citizenship and its Discontents, Permanent Black, Ranikhet.
- [16]. Mathur, Priyanca 1999Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and the State: A Conceptual Study, Centre for Political Science, School of Social sciences Jawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi (Unpublished thesis).
- [17]. Mahanta, Nani Gopal 2021 Citizenship Debate over NRC & CAA: Assam and the Politics of History, Sage Publications, New Delhi.
- [18]. Misra, Udayon 2017 Burden of History: Assam and the Partition-Unresolved issues, OUP, New Delhi
- [19]. Nag, Sajal 1990Roots of Ethnic Conflict:Nationality Question in North-East India, Manohar, New Delhi.
- [20]. Sharma, Manorama 1990Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony, Ajanta Publications, Delhi.
- [21]. Thapar, Romila 2021 Citizenship: The Right to be a Citizen in Romila Thapar, N.Ram, Gautam Bhatia and Gautam Patel ed. On Citizenship, Aleph, New Delhi.
- [22]. United Nations High (undatedA)Protecting refugees: Questions and for Commissioner for Refugees Answers, Publication Information Refugees Section, UNHCR, New Delhi.
- [23]. Weiner, Myron 1978Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.