
CAA and the Politics of Citizenship in Assam: An Unsettled Issue of Migration and Identity

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Abstract: The question of citizenship in Assam has historically been intertwined with patterns of migration, ethnic identity, and political contestation. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), enacted in 2019, has intensified these debates by introducing religion as a criterion for naturalization while intersecting with the state's long-standing anxieties over immigration from Bangladesh. This paper critically examines the politics of citizenship in Assam, situating the CAA within the broader historical trajectory of migration, the Assam Movement (1979–1985), and the signing of the Assam Accord of 1985. It explores how the unresolved challenges of defining “indigenous” and “foreigner” continue to shape conflicts over identity, representation, and belonging in the region. The abstract highlights three major dimensions: first, the socio-political tensions generated by large-scale migration and the perceived demographic imbalance; second, the legal and institutional frameworks—including the National Register of Citizens (NRC), Foreigners' Tribunals, and CAA—that have attempted, but failed, to provide a durable resolution; and third, the lived experiences of communities caught between state policies and identity politics. By analyzing parliamentary debates, judicial interventions, and grassroots mobilizations, the study argues that the CAA, rather than resolving the citizenship question, has deepened fissures between communities, sharpened religious and ethnic divides, and complicated the politics of recognition in Assam. The findings suggest that the citizenship issue remains an unsettled and unfinished project, reflecting broader tensions between constitutional principles of equality, the politics of ethno-nationalism, and the state's attempt to manage migration in a borderland region.

Keywords: CAA, Identity, Immigration, Northeast, Politics, Citizenship

Introduction

The question of citizenship in Assam represents a significant and distinctive element of India's broader nation-building process, standing apart because of its complex and contested socio-political history. Assam's experience with citizenship has been fundamentally shaped by a series of large-scale migrations, notably during three critical historical periods: the colonial era, the aftermath of the Partition of 1947, and the post-1971 period following the liberation of Bangladesh (Hussain, 2000). Each of these waves brought substantial demographic changes, translating into persistent anxieties, political mobilizations, and contestations over access to rights, resources, and representation. Colonial policies facilitated the movement of laborers and cultivators into Assam, laying the foundation for demographic transformation and planting the seeds of indigenous anxieties over land and identity (Baruah, 1999). The Partition of India in 1947 prompted another massive population influx, mostly Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, while many Muslims left for the new state of Pakistan. This demographic flux fundamentally altered Assam's socio-political dynamics, setting the stage for rising regionalism, ethnic assertion, and recurring debates over indigeneity, especially as local communities began to view outsiders as a threat to their cultural and political hegemony (Dutta, 2017).

The liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 marked another pivotal moment, resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring into Assam and further deepening the region's demographic and identity fault lines (Dutta, 2017). This relentless demographic change fueled the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), a mass movement demanding the identification and expulsion of “illegal” immigrants, which culminated in the signing of the Assam

Accord in 1985 (Goswami, 2020). The Assam Accord attempted to define who would qualify as a citizen and who would be considered a foreigner, introducing cutoffs based on entry dates and establishing mechanisms for detection and deportation. However, ambiguities and administrative complications meant these challenges remained largely unresolved (Baruah, 2020). Assam's unique geographical position as a borderland state at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia also heightened its vulnerability to cross-border movements and contributed to a persistent sense of insecurity among indigenous communities (Chakrabarty, 2022). Concerns over land alienation, cultural and linguistic dilution, and marginalization produced a volatile political atmosphere in which identity politics became deeply intertwined with citizenship policy (Guha, 2016). These processes have made the issue of citizenship in Assam not merely a technical or legal question but a deeply political, emotional, and existential one (Goswami, 2020).

In recent years, the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 has reignited old wounds and sparked new forms of contestation over citizenship, identity, and state policy (Baruah, 2020). The CAA offers a path to citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from neighboring countries, which many in Assam interpret as threatening the very spirit of the Assam Accord and as a direct assault on the cultural and demographic integrity of the Assamese community (The Supreme Court Observer, 2024). Critics argue that the CAA, alongside mechanisms such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC), has served to further polarize the state along religious and ethnic lines, offering no durable solutions and instead deepening the anxieties of both indigenous and minority communities (Guha, 2016). Today, debates over citizenship in Assam continue to highlight the tension between constitutional values of equality and secularism on one side, and ethno-nationalist aspirations on the other (The Supreme Court Observer, 2024). The persistent sense of crisis and contestation reflects the region's unsettled history, its ongoing struggles over migration, identity, and representation, and the limitations of legislative solutions when confronted with deep-rooted social fears and aspirations (Dutta, 2017).

Objectives

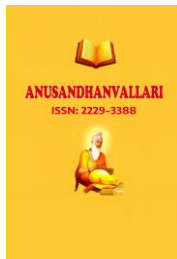
1. To critically analyze the unresolved citizenship issue in Assam by examining the historical background, political context, and socio-cultural impacts of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).
2. To investigate how migration has influenced identity politics in Assam, and to assess the effectiveness of legal and institutional mechanisms such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Foreigners' Tribunals in addressing these challenges.
3. To evaluate how the CAA has shifted the trajectory of citizenship debates in Assam, while highlighting the broader implications for borderland politics, migration, and minority rights across South Asia.

Methodology

The research methodology relies primarily on secondary literature, including scholarly works, government reports, and media accounts, as well as a critical analysis of legislative debates and judicial pronouncements. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the politics of citizenship in Assam by situating current developments within historical and institutional contexts.

Historical Background of Migration in Assam

The historical trajectory of migration into Assam is fundamental to comprehending the state's current complexities regarding citizenship and identity politics. Assam's demographic history is distinguished by overlapping and persistent waves of migration, which began in earnest during British colonial rule. The British administration, seeking to maximize agrarian output, encouraged the resettlement of peasants from present-day Bangladesh (then East Bengal) into the fertile lands of the Brahmaputra Valley. This demographic engineering



not only transformed Assam's economic structure but also initiated deep-seated anxieties among indigenous communities about cultural displacement and economic competition (Baruah, 2020).

Following the end of colonial rule, the Partition of India in 1947 marked a watershed in Assam's migration history. Due to its geographical proximity to East Pakistan, Assam bore the brunt of large, unregulated inflows of both Hindu and Muslim migrants fleeing communal violence, land dispossession, and new political uncertainties (Singha, 2018). Unlike the Western border, where migration flows soon subsided, Assam experienced sustained episodes of cross-border population movement. This influx contributed to heightened communal tensions, but also tested the political and administrative capacity of the state to regulate and absorb rapid demographic changes. The subsequent decades entrenched distinctions of "outsiders" and "sons of the soil," crystallizing ethnic boundaries and raising complex questions of belonging, entitlement, and citizenship (Dutta, 2012).

A third momentous episode occurred during and after the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. This conflict produced new waves of refugees, fundamentally reshaping the demographic contours of Assam (Hazarika, 2020). While many migrants would eventually return to Bangladesh, a significant number remained, intensifying existing fears among Assamese nationalists about a loss of linguistic and cultural preeminence. Concerns that the community's identity could be subsumed by relentless demographic shifts became central to political mobilization in Assam, particularly for indigenous groups who saw themselves as guardians of a unique regional culture (Borkakoti, 2013).

These unresolved anxieties culminated in the Assam Agitation (1979–1985), spearheaded by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), which demanded the detection and deportation of "illegal immigrants." The Assam Movement was not only about identifying foreigners but was also an assertion of Assamese identity and a reaction to what was increasingly perceived as a "demographic invasion" (Misra, 2014). The political crescendo of this agitation was the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which established March 24, 1971, as the official cut-off date for recognizing foreign nationals. However, the implementation of the Accord proved contentious and fraught with administrative obstacles. Many of its key provisions either failed to resolve the core issues or produced new complications related to documentation, legal verification, and continuous suspicion towards migrant communities (Biswas, 2020).

The lingering uncertainties fostered by the history of migration were further institutionalized through measures such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and later, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These measures have continued to rely heavily on policing boundaries of identity and belonging, but have been frequently criticized for perpetuating exclusion, reinforcing old divides, and failing to deliver lasting solutions to the citizenship dilemma (Goswami, 2020; Saikia, 2019). Thus, the migration history of Assam cannot be reduced to discrete episodes; rather, it must be seen as a continuum shaped by colonial strategies, partition-induced convulsions, and repeated geopolitical crises in the subcontinent. These demographic and political upheavals have relentlessly shaped Assam's ethnic landscape, providing critical context for understanding why the question of citizenship and belonging remains such a deeply unsettled and polarizing issue in the state today (Hazarika, 2020).

The Assam Movement and the Assam Accord (1979–1985)

The Assam Movement (1979–1985) represents a defining moment in the state's modern history, wherein issues of migration, citizenship, and identity converged into mass political mobilization. Spurred primarily by fears of demographic imbalance due to illegal migration from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, the movement was led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) in alliance with political and civil society organizations. Its central demand was the detection and deportation of "foreigners" who had entered Assam after a pre-determined cut-off date (Basumatary, 2010). Widespread protests, economic blockades, and civil disobedience campaigns characterized the movement. Indigenous communities, particularly Assamese-speaking Hindus, perceived migration as an existential threat to their cultural, linguistic, and political identity. This period also witnessed



inter-ethnic tensions, as non-Assamese speaking populations—both Bengali Hindus and Muslims—were often targeted in the discourse surrounding “illegal immigrants” (Patowary, 2019).

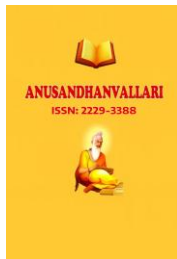
The Assam Accord of 1985 emerged as a political settlement designed to address these demands. Among its key provisions, the Accord established March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for identifying and deporting illegal migrants, recognized the need for protecting indigenous cultural identity, and promised the safeguarding of political rights for the Assamese people (Bhushan & D’souza, 2019). It also laid the groundwork for institutional mechanisms such as the Foreigners’ Tribunals to adjudicate cases of alleged illegal residency. Despite these provisions, the Accord faced challenges in implementation. Bureaucratic delays, inadequate record-keeping, and legal ambiguities limited the efficacy of the mechanisms designed to enforce the cut-off date. Consequently, the Assam Movement’s objectives were only partially realized, leaving unresolved questions about citizenship and belonging in the state (Mander, 2020). The Accord, while politically significant, did not eliminate anxieties around migration, and these unresolved tensions later became central to debates over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The Assam Movement and the subsequent Accord thus highlight the complex interplay between grassroots mobilization, state response, and legal frameworks in managing migration and citizenship issues. They also underscore the enduring salience of identity politics in Assam, which continues to shape contemporary discourses around CAA and demographic change.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks of Citizenship

The evolution of legal and institutional mechanisms governing citizenship in Assam has been shaped by the region’s tumultuous migration history and ongoing political disputes. Key among these mechanisms is the National Register of Citizens (NRC), established to separate legal citizens from “illegal immigrants.” While the original NRC was created in 1951, it was overhauled in Assam to operationalize key aspects of the 1985 Assam Accord, aiming to mitigate entrenched fears of demographic imbalance (Singha, 2017). However, the NRC process encountered numerous obstacles, such as incomplete records, administrative flaws, and prolonged delays, all of which fueled uncertainty and left millions unsure of their citizenship status (Ganesan, 2013). Supporting the NRC are the Foreigners’ Tribunals, quasi-judicial entities tasked with settling cases of alleged illegal residence. Although intended to uphold due process, these tribunals have received criticism for inconsistent procedures, erratic verdicts, and a deficit of accessible legal advocacy for defendants (Mohan, 2019). Such structural issues have created an atmosphere of arbitrariness and amplified anxieties among affected groups, especially Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus with a migration background (Barooah, 2020).

The passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 brought about a major transformation, infusing religion into citizenship determination by granting expedited status to non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. While framed as relief for persecuted minorities, the CAA’s convergence with Assam’s NRC and the area’s longstanding migration-related apprehensions has ignited widespread public debate and protest. Many critics contend that the CAA compromises Indian citizenship’s secular foundations and heightens religious and ethnic tensions in Assam’s borderland context (Hazarika, 2020).

Beyond these statutory devices, the politics of citizenship in Assam has been influenced by judicial review and legislative debate. The Supreme Court has frequently stressed the necessity of procedural fairness in NRC and Foreigners’ Tribunal proceedings, while Parliament has intensely debated the societal and legal consequences of the CAA. This dynamic interplay highlights the enduring difficulty of marrying constitutional ideals with local demographic pressures and ethno-political challenges (Dutta, 2012). Taken together, Assam’s legal and institutional arrangements for citizenship regulation exemplify both state efforts to order citizenship and the stubborn obstacles to achieving effective implementation. These frameworks reveal an ongoing tension between formal law and political reality, helping to explain why citizenship remains such a contentious and unresolved issue in the region.



Identity, Belonging, and Community Responses

Citizenship in Assam is inextricably linked to questions of identity and belonging, as communities navigate the intersection of migration, ethnicity, and religion. Indigenous Assamese populations perceive migration, particularly from Bangladesh, as a threat to their cultural and linguistic dominance. These anxieties have fostered a strong ethno-nationalist discourse, wherein the notion of “sons of the soil” becomes central to debates over political and social rights (Biswas, 2020). Conversely, immigrant communities, including Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims, experience marginalization and uncertainty due to procedural complexities in the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the functioning of Foreigners’ Tribunals. The fear of statelessness has created social and psychological stress, shaping community-level responses that range from legal petitions to grassroots protests (Patowary, 2019). These responses highlight the uneven impact of citizenship laws and the negotiation of belonging within multi-ethnic contexts.

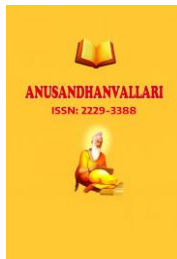
Religious identity plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). While non-Muslim migrants are offered fast-tracked citizenship under the Act, Muslim populations are excluded, intensifying inter-religious tensions. The legislation has thus reconfigured Assamese social hierarchies, privileged certain groups while reinforcing the historical marginalization of others (Barooah, 2020). Ethnic organizations and student bodies, such as the All-Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and other indigenous councils, have been pivotal in shaping public opinion and mobilizing communities. Their involvement underscores the link between identity politics and grassroots activism, illustrating how local perceptions of threat and exclusion influence broader political discourse (Borkakoti, 2013).

Community responses also include legal activism and engagement with state institutions. Affected groups frequently utilize Foreigners’ Tribunals, file writ petitions, and appeal to civil society organizations to safeguard their rights. These responses reflect not only individual survival strategies but also collective attempts to negotiate citizenship within contested socio-political frameworks (Mander, 2020). The dynamics of identity and belonging in Assam reveal the multi-layered complexity of citizenship debates. They demonstrate how historical migration, institutional interventions, and legislative changes interact to produce contestation, resistance, and negotiation among diverse communities, underscoring the deeply unsettled nature of citizenship politics in the state.

CAA and the Unsettled Citizenship Question

The enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 has brought Assam’s longstanding citizenship debates back into sharp focus. By providing fast-tracked citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the Act intersects directly with Assam’s historical anxieties over migration and demographic balance (Hazarika, 2020). While the CAA is intended to protect persecuted minorities, its selective application has intensified the perception among Assamese communities that the cultural and political equilibrium of the state is at risk (Singha, 2018). The CAA also raises significant legal and constitutional questions. Critics argue that the Act contravenes Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law, by differentiating based on religion. In Assam, these legal debates are compounded by the prior commitments of the Assam Accord (1985), which set a cut-off date of March 24, 1971, for the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants regardless of religion (Dutta, 2012). The resulting contradiction between the CAA and the Accord has created a legal and political impasse, contributing to widespread protests and social unrest.

Socially, the CAA has exacerbated divisions between communities. Indigenous Assamese groups, fearing a dilution of their cultural dominance, have often expressed ambivalence or opposition to the Act. Conversely, non-Muslim migrants view the CAA as a mechanism for legal recognition and social security, while Muslim populations perceive it as a form of exclusion and marginalization (Barooah, 2020). These contrasting perceptions reflect broader tensions in Assam regarding identity, religion, and state authority. Politically, the CAA has



catalyzed mobilizations across multiple levels of society, including student unions, ethnic organizations, civil society groups, and political parties. Grassroots protests, legislative debates, and judicial scrutiny illustrate the complex negotiation between state power, popular will, and constitutional norms (Bhushan & D'souza, 2019). Despite its enactment, the CAA has not resolved the fundamental question of who qualifies as a citizen in Assam; instead, it has introduced new layers of contestation, leaving the citizenship question in a state of persistent uncertainty. The CAA exemplifies the unsettled nature of citizenship in Assam. Far from providing clarity or resolution, the Act has intensified historical anxieties, generated new legal challenges, and complicated social and political dynamics. Assam's experience underscores the broader difficulty of reconciling national legislation with localized identity concerns, highlighting the intersection of law, politics, and ethnicity in citizenship debates.

Broader Implications

The unsettled citizenship question in Assam has far-reaching implications across social, political, and governance domains. Inter-ethnic relations in the state have been deeply affected, as historical anxieties over migration intersect with contemporary legal measures like the NRC and CAA. Indigenous communities perceive a threat to cultural survival, while migrant populations face uncertainty and exclusion, creating an environment prone to conflict and social tension (Basumatary, 2010). From a federalism perspective, the Assam case illustrates the challenges of balancing central legislation with state-specific historical and social contexts. The CAA, enacted by the central government, directly intersects with provisions of the Assam Accord and the NRC, highlighting tensions between state autonomy and national policy objectives (Mohan, 2019). This tension underscores the difficulty of harmonizing local identity concerns with uniform national frameworks in borderland regions.

Democratic governance and the rule of law are also affected. The NRC and Foreigners' Tribunals have been criticized for procedural inconsistencies, delays, and the potential for human rights violations, raising questions about the state's capacity to administer justice fairly (Patowary, 2019). Furthermore, the selective application of the CAA introduces a religious criterion into citizenship laws, challenging constitutional guarantees of equality and secularism (Hazarika, 2020). Comparatively, Assam offers insights into broader borderland and migration politics in South Asia, where historical population movements and ethnic diversity interact with modern legal frameworks. The state's experience demonstrates the importance of inclusive policymaking, robust institutional capacity, and community engagement to prevent marginalization and conflict (Barooah, 2020). Collectively, these implications highlight that citizenship in Assam is not merely a legal or bureaucratic issue, but a multidimensional challenge affecting social cohesion, political stability, and constitutional governance.

Conclusion

Assam's experience with the Citizenship Amendment Act, the NRC, and historical migration patterns underscores the persistent and unsettled nature of citizenship in the state. The interplay of migration, identity, and legal frameworks has produced a complex socio-political landscape where questions of belonging, exclusion, and political recognition remain contested. Historical interventions such as the Assam Accord, while significant, have failed to resolve the structural anxieties surrounding citizenship and identity. The CAA, intended to address the plight of persecuted minorities, has instead intensified tensions by intersecting with Assam's unique historical and demographic context. Legal ambiguities, procedural challenges, and social contestation demonstrate that citizenship in Assam is far from a settled matter. Indigenous communities, migrant populations, and religious minorities continue to navigate a landscape marked by uncertainty, highlighting the need for nuanced, inclusive, and context-sensitive policymaking. Assam exemplifies the challenges of reconciling national legal frameworks with localized socio-cultural realities. The state's ongoing citizenship debates illustrate that identity, law, and politics are deeply intertwined, and that durable solutions require recognition of historical grievances, respect for constitutional principles, and engagement with affected communities. Addressing these issues is not merely a



legal task but a broader socio-political imperative for sustaining democratic governance and social harmony in the region.

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