

## OPINION

Relevant for: Indian Polity & Constitution | Topic: Issues and challenges pertaining to the Federal Structure

The past is usually present in Assam, and it isn't always pleasant. Disagreements over updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the Citizen (Amendment) Bill, 2016 have brought to surface tension over the Bengali—and, allegedly, Bangladeshi—population settled there.

Several Bengali organizations, especially in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley-Cachar area support both the NRC process and the bill. Many Axomiya feel the terms of the NRC update and provisions of the bill are pro-immigrant. The pro- and anti-peace factions of United Liberation Front of Asom have weighed in on this side. There is a foreshadowing of possible violence. Few among younger generations in Assam recall there was once bloodshed over Bengalis—and not just the Nellie incident in 1983 when nearly 2,000 migrant men, women and children were butchered. Few recall the Bongal Kheda (get rid of the Bengalis) campaign that began in mid-1960 in the Brahmaputra valley. Or that in May 1961, 11 Bengalis were shot dead in Silchar. They were protesting the imposition of Assamese in a Bengali-majority region.

History is useful in such situations. The problem's genesis can truly be blamed on the British, though that doesn't absolve cynical post-Independence politics in Assam.

The East India Company extended its conquest of Assam in 1826 with that of Cachar six years later, and merged them with the Bengal Presidency. After administrative reorganization in the wake of the 1857 mutiny, the largely Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet, Cachar, and Goalpara—in what is known as Lower Assam—were with some hill districts merged into the new Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam. The reason Sylhet and Cachar were merged with the new province, suggests Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, an academician specializing in ethno-linguistic conflicts in Assam, was to meet the "inadequate revenue potential of Assam". It administratively cut off Bengali speakers from Bengal, besides isolating the Sylheti who tend to identify themselves as Sylheti first before associating with any other nationalistic, linguistic or religious group.

The merger also had an unintended effect—of clubbing Bengali-speaking areas to Assam even as hiving off Assam was also done to assuage Assamese needs of identity. "The situation for the Assamese was nothing less than paradoxical," Bhattacharjee writes. "The move was a moment of liberation from Bengal, but hardly from the Bengalis; the much needed and desired freedom and right to articulate and nurture the Assamese identity seemed sabotaged from the start."

Matters became messier with Partition. In 1947, much of Muslim-majority Sylhet went over to newly-born Pakistan after a referendum that year, except for the eastern extremity of Sylhet where a majority were both Bengali-speaking and Hindu. This remained with Assam—and India. Trouble would soon brew in this cauldron of Bengalis, cut off from West Bengal and from the very Bengali East Pakistan.

Meanwhile, from the early twentieth century there was a steady trickle of Bengali agricultural migrants into Assam, encouraged by the colonial government to settle along the Brahmaputra, but Partition unlocked a flood of Bengali Hindu refugees into eastern Indian territories from East Pakistan, a movement spurred by anti-Hindu riots there in 1950. There was a massive influx into West Bengal and Tripura, with its own set of consequences. And there was substantial influx into Assam, which had never hidden its general dislike of Bengali-speaking people, brought about in no small measure by the historical arrogance of some Bengalis towards the Assamese

from the time of John Company.

While Assam's Congress government under Gopinath Bordoloi accepted the inevitable after some months, a circular it issued on 4 May 1948 basically sent out a personae non grata message. It cited "peace, tranquillity and social equilibrium in towns and villages", and that, "in no circumstances" should any settlement of land be made to those not indigenous. The definition of non-indigenous people extended to "non-Assamese settlers in Assam though they already have lands and houses of their own and have made Assam their home to all intents and purposes."

All this collectively lit a fire that is yet to die down. More on this next week.

*This column focuses on conflict situations and the convergence of businesses and human rights and runs on Thursdays. Read Sudeep Chakravarti's earlier columns at [livemint.com/rootcause](http://livemint.com/rootcause)*

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