

Democracy in Crisis: Re-examination of the 1983 State Election as Ethnic Flashpoint in Assam

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ABSTRACT:

The Assam movement (1975-85) represents one of the largest mass movement in the post-colonial state of Assam driven by intersecting issues ranging from resource geopolitics, demographic anxiety and issues of contested citizenship. The entire movement, in its infancy, developed as a civil society agitation demanding detection, disenfranchisement, and deportation of illegal immigrants from Assam, but later, the movement underwent intense ethnic and communal polarization where more than 800 agitators lost their lives, thousands sustained injuries. This article analyzes the definitive structural turning point of the movement: the highly contested 1983 Assam Legislative Assembly election. By blending theories of regionalist nativism and political economy, this study illustrates how a state-enforced election served as an institutional trigger, splitting voters into hostile camps, driving severe voting polarization and ignited severe clashes that reflected as majoritarian and minority conflict. This study specifically examines the violent episodes of Assembly election of 1983, by positioning it as a juncture that paved way for long term religious polarization in Assam. Through an analysis of long-term population shifts from the 1983 elections, this paper reveals how systemic insistence on electoral processes during an unresolved identity crisis, fractured Assam's pluralistic social fabric and how this friction left behind deep and lasting patterns of socio-political division in Assam.

Keywords: Assam Movement, electoral polarization, Nellie, immigrants, 1983 election, Ethnic violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Northeast India, the region appraised as “mosaic of multilingual ethnicity” is popularly held as one of India's most diverse region.

The region's political past is punctuated by persistent ethnic assertion, weak institutions and varied localized autonomy movements. Understanding these deep political fractures, it is essential to trace the historical trajectory of how

the region was originally absorbed into the framework of modern state system.

Following the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, it fundamentally altered its geopolitical landscape of Northeast. Britishers for administrative convenience, implemented cartographic restructuring in the newly integrated areas of Northeast, frequently drawing and redrawing administrative borders and systematically disregarded the ethnocultural configuration of local hill and plain tribes. This forced integration led to dual disruption, traditionally linked areas to Assam were excised, marked by forced integration of culturally distinct areas—such as the Lhota Naga (1875) and Ao Naga (1889) territories into the province of Assam. Beyond mere territorial reconfiguration, the demand for Assam's natural resources drastically altered the population pattern, disrupting the region's population dynamics. Attracted by dense timber reserves, tracts of uncultivated lands, the identification of commercial tea cultivation by Bruce brothers, discovery of oil reserves between 1830 and 1850, it transformed the province into colonial enterprise. It was marked by acute local labour deficit, to meet its ends, the British administration facilitated widespread state-sanctioned immigration to sustain its extractive economy. Labourers from different ethnolinguistic groups—predominantly from Chotanagpur tribal groups (Santhal, Munda, Gond) alongside Marwari traders, Nepali settlers, and Bengali Hindu and Muslim populations mainly from areas like Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, alongside personnel, traders, and agriculturalists from Nepal, Bihar, and Nepal migrated to the lands of Assam to work across the expanding oil fields, and agricultural sectors and Tea Estates.

While these patterns began under colonial rule, these demographic influxes persisted long after independence. This state led immigration continued effortlessly in post colonial period, it resulted in demographic transformation that exacerbated heightened local vulnerabilities triggering crisis over cultural identity, customary land tenures and equitable political representation for native populations.

Subsequent post-colonial geopolitics—the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and the 1965 Indo - Pakistan conflict —intensified cross-border population movements. Consequently, by the late 1900s, states throughout Northeastern Frontier, particularly Assam endured acute systemic and communal anxieties. The Assam movement is the protest movement against the issue of illegal migrants and it got its manifestation through various ethnic stands. The Assam Movement or the anti-foreigners agitation was indeed one of the most turbulent phase in the history of the state. This conflict arose in the context of immigration of outsiders into the territory of Assam, arising out of the fear of native population in the state that they would eventually become linguistic and ethnic minority in their homeland. The movement has drastically changed the socio-political environment of Assam. The middle class assamese people played the leading role in the movement and the native sons of Assam also actively participated in the movement owing their allegiance to the soil. Tilottama Misra, one of the noted scholars of Northeast, reflected in her writings 'Assam: A Colonial Hinterland, about incidents of outsiders getting lucrative jobs, exploiting the resources of the natives and becoming owners of big establishments in the land of Assam. The collective consciousness of the indigenous community compelled them to actively participate in the movement. A large section of Assamese people supported the movement as it was related with the survivality of the Asomiya community. The struggle for protection of 'Axomia Identity' possesses deep historical roots, but it got its impetus after the birth of the Assam movement. The movement embraces all aspects-social, political, economic, administrative, cultural life of the indigenous people of Assam. This period of Assam reflected the breakdown of institutional machinery marked by communal polarization, subjugation of common law of the land to the interests and voices of regionalism.

This study specifically scrutinizes the core structural dynamics of the 1983 Legislative Assembly election as the definitive flashpoint of

this collective action. It reveals how an administrative effort intended to reinstate democratic equilibrium instead formalised ethnic divides, consolidated religious polarization, permanently altering Assam's political landscape.

“Assam movement is a very complex social movement. It would be interesting as well as challenging for the students of social movements to study the Assam Movement objectively in its totality” (Hussain, 1993)

Theoretical Framework: The Nativist Anxiety Versus Political Economy:

Academic literature on the root causes of the Assam Movement is generally divided into two distinct theoretical paradigms. To grasp the complexities of the 1983 voting crisis, it is necessary to integrate these contrasting analytical lenses.

The Regionalist Framework:

Proponents of this particular view, such as Sanjiv Baruah and N.K. Phukan, argue that the movement was a defensive nativist response to structural threats of existential minoritization. Spearheaded by the Assamese middle class and the peasantry, the movement, according to this school, was based on the notion of protecting their material and cultural capital—namely language, resource, land and identity. This paradigm legitimises the movement as a legitimate assertion of self preservation against resource exploitation and systemic political marginalisation against the backdrop of majority conflict, operating under the ‘fear - psychosis’ over long term survival of the indigenous community.

The Political Economy and Marxist Critique:

Contrary to the regionalist framework, the Marxist intellectuals most notably, Hiren Gohain, Amlendu Guha and Monirul Hussain, examines the movement as an elite manipulation, a politically manufactured crisis, instrumentalised within the developmental dynamics of regional capitalism.

This school conceptualises migration as a long-standing, non-conflictual historical process that fundamentally constituted the composite Assamese identity. Proponents further emphasized that subaltern migrant groups functioned as indispensable manual local labourers, vital for regional agriculture and economic growth and thus acted as the primary engine of the regional economy. It frames the agitation as a “chauvinistic mechanism”, deployed by natives to suppress non indogenous population and the rising waves of left- wing coalitions, strategically mitigating and neutralising the threats to hegemony of the natives.

Gohain stated that the agitation is not justified as it was the general outcome of the situation of failing to foster the virtues of steady diligence, thrift and punctuality among Assamese people and uneven development as root causes of economic ills of the state and on this account the demands for uprooting non- indigenous communities abruptly is not a solution but is something which for sure will be counted as a fascist move for autonomy.

Towards an analytical synthesis:

A critical synthesis of both the frameworks reveals that both are not mutually exclusive, but reflects complementary dynamics of regional political economy. One side of the the Assam movement examines it as a movement operated as a organic, bottom-up social movement, driven by deep existential anxiety. Tilly (2004:130-02) argues that social movements are sophisticated forms of ‘collective behaviour’. The collective behaviour guides group actions which play a vital role in a movement. Tilly recognized social movements as a major vehicle for ordinary people’s participation in public politics. By participating in a movement, ordinary people are able to attain direct power through collective effort. Collective participation of a large group of people can bring about changes in such a manner that can bypass established procedures and lead to dramatic changes. The Assam Movement in post-independent Assam brought about such changes

in society and politics of Assam. After the Assam Accord, the leadership of the movement formed a regional party that entered into the electoral politics of Assam. Later, that party formed a government in Assam. This operational trajectory of the move revealed a different story. The movement chiefly functioned as a mechanism to secure middle-class hegemony over regional politics, demonstrating how subnational sentiments can be strategically instrumentalized to consolidate and maintain regional political and economic power.

Its operational trajectory was simultaneously utilized by regional middle-class leadership to establish long-term political hegemony. Existing

literature addressing the core nature of the movement bifurcates into two dominant theoretical paradigms. Untangling the intricacies of the 1983 electoral crisis necessitates combining of these two competing analytical lenses.

Demographic Upheaval and the Roots of Regional Anxiety:

The native apprehension underpinning the movement was more than a social narrative, it was rather grounded in the hard reality of evolving census figures. Table 1, tracks this longitudinal divergence Assam's population growth rates and the national average throughout the twentieth century.

Table-1: Comparative Population Growth Rates: Assam Versus Rest of India (1901-1971)

Year	Growth Rate Assam	Growth rate Rest of India	Variation
130-02	16.99	5.75	11.26
130-02	20.48	-0.31	20.78
130-02	19.91	11.0	8.91
130-02	20.40	14.22	6.17
130-02	19.93	13.31	6.62
130-02	34.98	21.51	13.34
130-02	34.95	24.80	10.15

Source: Census of India (1971); adapted from historical records.

The data illustrates sustained departure from national demographic trends, showing trends of population explosion in Assam, marked by population surges in the post-1951 era. The realization of the fact that the growth of population in Assam was much higher than the all India growth-rate made the common people apprehensive of the situation. The growth rate was tremendous during 1961 to 1971. This particular statistical analysis was interpreted as conclusive proof of undocumented immigration in Assam. This was attributed to the Indo-Pak war in 1965 which was followed by the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 where many people came to Assam from across the border to be settled.

Chandan Kr. Sharma argued, "The freedom movement in East-Pakistan during 130-02 and the Pakistani administration's violent repression of the movement also compelled lakhs of East Pakistani citizens to enter Assam as refugees, many of whom did not return to their homeland

even after the formation of Bangladesh. All these contributed to the rising anti-immigration temperature in the Assamese public discourse" (Sharma ,2016). Since then, year after year, Assam has witnessed the immigration of thousands of immigrants where neither their places of settlement nor the exact number of immigrants is known to the common populace of Assam.

This macro level anxiety was further compounded by micro-demographic realignments within specific administrative districts. The sharp spike in population growth rates between 1951 and 1971 were widely viewed by Assamese public discourse as concrete and measurable proof of undocumented cross-border migration. This macro-level panic were made worse by micro-demographic realignments happening in specific administrative districts during the crucial years

of political mobilization, a trend clearly outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 reflects the growth patterns of the Muslim population across selected districts from

1971 to 1991, an interval period directly spanning the timeline of anti foreigner agitation.

Table-2: Decadal Increase of Muslim Population across selected districts of Assam (1971-1991)

Administrative District	Muslim Population Growth Rate
Dhubri	71.13
Kokrajar	100.83
Bongaigaon	92.78
Goalpara	86.52
Barpeta	65.19
Nalbari	93.40
Darrang	108.10
Morigaon	70.26
Nagoan	81.91

Source: Census of India, Various Reports

This shifting demographics profoundly transformed the electoral calculus of the state.

According to the 1991 census, the percentage of Hindu population in Assam fell from 72.51 percent in 1971 to 67.13 percent in 1991 and the the Muslim population rose from 24.56 percent in 1971 to 28.53 percent in 1991, in this context, electoral rolls became highly contested sites of political struggle. "It has proved, beyond doubt that the infiltrations from Bangladesh has contributed largely to this increase in the Muslim population (Mishra ,1999)." This demographic transformation polluted the politics of Assam. Thus, the growing population propelled apprehension in the minds of the Asamiyas and they raised their voice against all those non-Asamiya groups residing in Assam.

From Protest to Institutional Stalemate (1979 -1982):

The movement traces its origin to the event of vacancy of seating Member of Parliament in Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency which fell vacant following the death of a Janata Party MP of Lok Hiralal Patwari on March 28, 1979. The seeds of anger and apprehension which later turned into mass movement were sown when the election commission conducted the by poll of the Mangoldoi parliamentary constituency in

1979. The avowal of India's chief election officer of that period S.L. Shakhthar on the issue of inclusion of foreign nationals names in the electoral rolls in the states of north-east India added to apprehension. The alleged sudden increase in the number of voters in the electoral rolls was taken up by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) to launch the movement. All the leaders of the AASU demanded the postponement of the by-elections in Mangaldoi till the names of the alleged illegal foreigners were deleted from the electoral rolls.

The All Assam Student Union asked the country's poll panel not to hold the polls with the electoral rolls that contained the names of lakhs of immigrants. The state's influential student organization asked the Commission to hold the polls after revising the electoral rolls which drew overwhelming support from the people of all walks of life.

Subsequently a number of complaints were filed from members of civil society tiring a correction of the electoral rolls. AASU intensified the movement with the 12 hour statewide Assam bandh on 8 June 1979 demanding "Deletion, Disenfranchisement and Deportation" of the illegal settlers. They further demanded deportation of all the immigrants who settled

after 1961. Remarkably this was the notch of an active episode of objection.

They also demanded that all who had entered the state after 1961 should be excluded from the state's electoral rolls. The demand was wholeheartedly supported by a large number of people of Assam and there was positive response to the bandh calls. This marked the inception of the Assam Movement. In social history of Assam, events of August 25th and 26th of 1979 emerged historically significant when many organizations namely All Assam students' Union, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Asom Yuva Samaj, Asom Jatiyata badi Dal (Girin Barua), Jatiyatabadi Dal (Khagen Hazarika), Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad, Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad, Plains Tribal Council, Karbi Parishad and All Assam Tribal Union united under the banner of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parisad (henceforth AAGSP) demanded for detection and deportation all foreign nationals living in Assam. The formation of the AAGSP gave an impetus to the movement. As a platform for Assamese masses to fight the issue of illegal foreigners, the AAGSP was able to draw the avid support of lakhs of people of Assam. The main objective of AAGSP was to detect and deport the foreign nationals from Assam along with the economic development of Assam. On 6th and 7th September 1979 both the AASU and the AAGSP called for a mass protest throughout Assam to stop the influx of foreign nationals.

This mass protest received overwhelming support from a large section of the Asamiyas. The leadership of the Assam Movement continued their protest by staging demonstration, Satyagraha, and other non-violent methods of protest to detect and deport the foreign nationals from Assam.

Hussain argued, "The leadership popularized the idea very strongly that the Asamiyas were losing their identity. The fear of losing their identity in their own homeland propelled the mass movement and many participants made immense sacrifices in order to fulfill the demands..." (Hussain, 1993).

The Asamiya bourgeoisie also strongly supported the movement. The Assamese middle class, along with the vernacular press popularized the idea that the Assamese were losing their identity as well as their control over the state politics in the face of unabated influx from Bangladesh. Though the movement was a common platform for the all Assamese to safeguard their interests, yet the actions and courses that the movement produced in due course helped the Assamese middle class to establish their domination over the society and politics of Assam.

The Assamese privileged class feels insecurity and considers the growing number of alleged foreign nationals in Assam as a considerable 'threat' to their economic, socio-cultural and political existence. They developed the anxiety that if foreign nationals in Assam remain unrestrained the native people would lose their identity. Phukan argued that "The Assam movement on the issue of foreign nationals has been the manifestation of this anxiety" (Phukan, 1996).

The birth of The All Assam Gana Sangram Parisad further strengthened the movement where people cutting across the religious lines joined the fight. AAGSP aimed at making Assam free of immigrants to pave the way for a sustainable economic development. The growing number of migrants in Assam is viewed by a large section of the Assamese people as a threat to their socio-cultural and economic life (Phukan, 1996).

Religious polarization surfaced during the movement when right winged institutions like RSS (Rashtriya Sayamsewak Sagha) and Jana Sangha intervened regarding the matter of deportation of illegal migrants. Gradually the Muslims started feeling a separate identity in the political sphere of Assam. The agitating leaders made a clarion call to the political parties and civil society organization to support the movement saying that this was the only way to save the soul of Assam and its people. With the quick interference of V.H.P, RSS and other groups, the agitation turned into a new

communal life (Ahmed ,1999). The separate political identity created the ground for creation of a new organization the All Assam Minority Student Union (AAMSU). It included Bengali Hindus as well as Bengali Muslim descents. (Baruah, 2001).

Violent incidents occurred between the leaders of AASU and AAMSU. These incidents finally resulted in the yawning gap between Hindus and Muslims. "At one point a BJP-RSS sentiment entered the movement and an anti Muslim feeling emerged. Muslim were equated with foreigners. As a result the people of Assam were divided into majority and minority" (Dutta, 2012).

This institutional friction between AASU and AAMSU fractured the state's pluralist fabric shifting the anti foreigner agitation into a domestic majority - minority confrontation. This polarization culminated into widespread communal disharmony and violence most tragically exemplified by the Nellie Massacre of 1983, where state sponsored electoral process transformed into an existential communal struggle between the majority and minority groups.

Nandana Dutta quotes the remarks of Hiren Gohain "For five years the Assamese people have had their lives wasted". "A catastrophic cyclone came and spoiled hundreds of lives, destroyed age-old intercommunity relationship, showed the seeds of poisonous herbs and throne for the future (Dutta ,2012)".

Assam's spheres of politics kept taking new trend since Anwar Taimur took oath as Assam Chief Minister in 1980. At the outset she adopted a tough stand over the agitators and disallowed the government employees from participating in the movement. She patronized a gang of bureaucrats to nip the agitation in the bud. "The process appeared to be one of the de-Assamesization of state bureaucracy and it reinforced the fear of Assamese minoritization and of immigrant power." (Baruah ,2001).

The agitation with episodes of communal clashes, transitioned from its foundational notions of non-violent satyagraha altered into a

more violent phase, when the state apparatus failed to provide timely administrative remedy. This polarization culminated into widespread communal disharmony, where many groups, organisations intervened attempting to reframe the anti-foreigner agitation into a strictly anti-Muslim discourse.

This external strain, coupled with growing minority anxieties, triggered a powerful counter-movement. In 1980, Linguistic and religious minority population banded together under the banner of the All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU). This institutional rivalry fundamentally shifted the nature and trajectory of the unrest, transforming a civil society movement directed originally against the state authorities into a localized internal conflict between deeply polarized social groups.

The Genesis of Violence and Communalism, Excerpts from 1983 Elections in Assam: Reflections of Institutional Enforceability and Electoral Farce:

The sixth Assam legislative assembly failed to complete its term and it dissolved on 19th March in 1983. The dissolution of the state legislature indicated that according to the constitutional provision Assam would go in for an election before 18 March 1983(Hussain, 1993) to pave the way for political stability in the state. The Centre was keen to hold the assembly election to safeguard the political interest and announced the polling dates on 14, 17, 20th February,1983. Despite repeated warnings and prevailing tensions, elections were held on 14th and 17 th February,1983. "The centre justified its decision on the ground of a constitutional compulsion: The period of the suspension of elected assembly could not be extended any further" (D, Citha). The decision was running into a hail of demonstration and criticism. The leadership of Assam movement opposed the move to hold the assembly polls without deleting the names of suspected immigrants. The election was meant as a direct challenge to the organizer of the Assam movement. The threatened "immigrant" communities saw in the

election an opportunity to elect an "immigrant" friendly government. "While most of Assamese society abstained from voting, a section of Bengali speaking minority voted, which enraged the agitation leaders" (Yasmeen J, 2020).

This institutional rigid stance stripped away the democratic legitimacy of the election. The protesting leadership saw the election as an existential crisis designed and aimed by the state authorities to consolidate "immigrant power" using inaccurate and flawed electoral rolls. Anxious minority pockets on the otherhand saw the election as the only chance for guaranteeing constitutional protection through an immigrant-friendly local government government.

The administrative execution of the election resembled a full time military campaign. The massive strike by local government workers stripped the state of tens of thousands of needed polling workers and presiding officers, leaving only three districts remained with functional staff. In response to this, the central government, airlifted approximately 8,000 external civil servants from across India to manage the booths. A vast majority of them never reached their pooling stations due to systematic infrastructural sabotage carried out by anti- election boycotters who demolished the communication system- wrecking bridges, ambushing convoys, and cutting off communication channels.

The movement also revolve around the narrative of legitimacy of the 1983 elections on practical grounds. Agitators often question about the legal aspects of the election conducted in 1983. According to official sources, a total of 12,204 presiding officers and 36,612 polling officers were required for conducting the election, out of which only 3 district in Assam had enough man power to work for the elections. The center therefore recruited near about 8000 personnel from outside to work in the election process in Assam in 1983, which was inadequate to meet the desired number of manpower in pooling booths of Assam. Many of the officers never reached the territory of Assam due to the furry of the boycotters like bombing of briges and ambusing of the election convoys. It reflects the 1983 election in Assam, got converted into a complete farce.

As detailed in Tables 3 and 4, the resulting voting turnout, clearly illustrated deep socio-ethnic polarization across the state at the time.

In the constituencies dominated by natives, electoral boycott was in absolute sense, conversely in contrast, minority-dense constituencies, turnout remained steady despite widespread threats and severe systematic bottlenecks. Voter participation, mostly, followed a pattern predictable from the ethnic settlement patterns. In constituencies where Bengalis were predominant the turnout was high, and in ethnic Assamese strongholds it was low. (Baruah, 2001).

Table 3: Voting turn out Ethnic Assamese dominated dominated Constituencies (1983)

Name of Constituency	Voting turn out percentage (%)
Dibrugarh	8.71
Sadia	6.31
Bukakhat	2.65
Sarupathar	2.55
Gulaghat	3.23
Khumtai	1.53
Dergaon	2.46
Jorhat	1.48
Titabor	2.48
Tiyak	2.00
Amguri	3.23
Mahmora	9.72
Thawra	8.23

Sibsagar	8.23
Jagiroad	4.37
Morigaon	1.94
Barhampur	4.98
Jalukbari	4.97
East-Guwahati	1.67
West-Guwahati	9.31
Kamalpur	2.06
Nalbari	2.99
Dharampur	0.38
Bihpuria	0.68
North-Lakhimpur	4.89
Dhakuakhana	0.85
Dhemaji	0.40
Junai	9.28

Source: Adapted from from Assam Movement and its Fallout by Monoj Kumar Nath (2015, pp. 135–136) (2015, pp. 135–136) India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality by Sanjiv Baruah ,2001, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

The hill district of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills were mostly unaffected by the Assam movement and the turnout there was normal-55.91 percent in North Cachar Hills and 39.54 percent in Karbi Anglong. (Baruah, 200)

Table 4: Voting turnout in minority dense (Bengali speaking) pockets in 1983 Assam Assembly Election

Name of the Constituency	Voting turnout percentage (%)
Dhing	55.25
Rupahighat	52.15
Samaguri	40.72
Jamunamukh	50.50
Hojai	50.07
Lambding	43.37
Sarbhug	52.68
Jania	69.30
Bagbor	68.86
Chenga	56.86
Sarukhetri	33.84
Mankachar	79.44
SouthSalmara	73.49
Dhubri	68.69
Gauripur	61.36
Bilasipara West	68.95
Bilasipara North	44.40
Goalpara North	31.75
Goalpara West	41.94
Jaleswar	65.76
Dalgaon	6.55
Bashibar	70.97

Source: Adapted from Assam Movement and its Fallout by Monoj Kumar Nath (2015, pp. 135–

136) India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality by Sanjiv Baruah ,2001, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

This stark statistical divergence underscores the election's lack of true legitimacy. While Assamese strongholds categorically rejected the ballot, heavily guarded minority turned out in high numbers under intense security, seeing the ballot as their only shield for communal preservation.

The Minority people participated in the election which was totally boycotted by the agitators. Gradually the Muslims of Assam brought a distinctive political awareness which led to the development of separate identity in the affairs of state. The communal politics that developed at that time affected the linguistic minority, law and order situation and rumors resulted in a chapter of communal flare up in Assam Assembly polls in 1983. Even after the imposition President's Rule before the assembly polls by the Central Government, the law and order mechanism failed to deal with the incidents of communal riot where thousands of people were killed, hundreds of villages were torched and many others went missing. The pre poll political landscape was mired in political and administrative chaos and conditions punctuated by sporadic incidents of violence. The surging political ambition was also responsible for some other pre poll clashes in some other parts of the state. From 1971 onwards, and basically from 1979 to 1985, the state of Assam had witnessed the worst communal violence among the Assamese and non assamese, particularly between Bengali Muslims and Indigenous Assamese in the enduring legacy of Hindu-Muslim communal synergy. The communal flare-ups in different parts of the state made the Assamese Muslims feel increasingly insecure" (Misra, 1999).

The year 1983 witnessed a total collapse of the brotherhood and bonhomie between Hindus and Muslims. The atmosphere of Assam was overwhelmed with police firing, attacks on polling booths, setting fire on bridges, cutting up of roads. The agitators fought tooth and nail

to prevent individuals from casting their votes, so that they could wash out the motive of the central government by making the election a dud one. It instigated an era of prolonged period of political volatility and civil unrest in Assam thereby rendering the state apparatus dysfunctional.

The enforcement of this polarized election quickly precipitated extensive inter-communal bloodshed. Law and order completely disintegrated across the state, the law and order manifested in state-sanctioned police firings, buildings were torched and it resulted in systematic ethnic conflict. The hostility peaked in a horrific tragedy on February 18, 1983, with the infamous Nellie Massacre in the Nagaon district, apodictically, considered as one of the largest and severest massacre that the contemporary world has recorded.

"The 1983 election of Assam emerged as a turning point of the anti-foreigners agitation. After the Nellie Massacre, some of the leaders parted with AASU and opposed the anti-Muslim tone of the movement". (Kimura, M,2013).

In this wave of violence, organized mobs encircled Bengali Muslim villages surrounding Nellie area. More than eight thousand people—mostly of Muslims of Bengali descent—were killed in Nellie during the violence surrounding the election. Most of the violence took place as supporters of the election clashed with opponents. (Baruah, 2001).

Contemporary data and scholarly literature state that thousands of people—mostly working-class Muslims of Bengali lineage were systematically killed within a twenty-four-hour window, forcing the survivors to flee for their lives toward the Kopili River .This was followed by a large scale breakdown in law and order, and violence, in which atleast 8000 people were reported killing during the election campaign from January 7th until February 20th which was the last day of the polling"(D, Citha).Crucially, political experts note that the violence was driven by complex local dynamics: attackers from the native Tiwa community and localized

Scheduled Caste groups were incited through the calculated belief that the inheriting lands vacated by minority minority populations would be redistributed to them. In contrast, movement leaders defended the underlying friction as an inevitable eruption stemming from deep seated grievances over land dispossession and demographic shifts. "Scholars like Makiko Kimura, Sanjoy Hazarika, Monirul Hussain, also cite that the local Laung (Tiwa) Tribe and other schedule caste Hindus in and around Nellie were provoked to believe that the land abandoned by the Bengali speaking Muslims would become theirs after the massacre". (Yasmeen, J, 2020).

However the native population defend the massacre with their own narratives. "Agitators consider this massacre as a result of continued influx of Muslim immigrants and their expropriation of land. (Kimura, M,2003).

The extensive international and national press coverage of the Nellie catastrophe deeply split the movement's unified front. Secular and native Assamese Muslim factions -early supporters of the anti-foreigner platform started to pull away from the protests in response to its intensifying sectarian orientation. The large number of Muslims who were victimized of violence during the election and the national and international press coverage of it as a case of Muslims being killed, strained the ethnic Assamese Muslims attitude towards the movement (Baruah, 2001). It reflects the rise of anti democratic and communal flare up among the majority and minority communities in Assam through the institutionalisation of state sponsored assembly elections.

Riots became very endemic just before, during and immediately after the 1983 elections to the state legislature" (Hussain,1993). The elections, held on a war footing, got drowned in blood in many areas. (Dasgupta and Guha, 1983). Series of massacres occurred in different parts of Assam. All these made the State legislative election of 1983 a violent one.

The Assembly Election of 1983 reflects the vision of the agitators of the entire movement on grounds of Nationalism and

Constitutionalism. According to the leaders, the entire movement is legitimate and the 1983 election as episode of 'Communal Disharmony' traces its core to the underlying ideals of Indian Constitution. "The agitation leaders justify their stand with reference to Article 326 of Indian Constitution according to which only Indian Citizens can be enrolled on the voters' list. The national Registrar of Citizens of 1951 and the voters' list for the First National Elections in 1952 have to be used as the base for identifying foreigners" (D, Citha). This reflects the political aspects of the movement. According to Monirul Hussain, "The Assam movement seems more political than a social one. The issue of immigration of foreign nationals from across the border to Assam, raised by the leaders of movement apparently looks more of a political and constitutional issue than a social problem. The Assam movement had all the fundamental elements of a social movement rather than simply a political one all historically significant political movements are in fact essentially, social movements because of their deep roots in society and their impact on it. The Assam movement too, had its root in the society and its impact was felt deeply by the people" (Hussain ,1993).The movement concluded with the signing of the historic "Assam Accord" in the year 1985 , a tripartite agreement among the Central Government, State Government and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) that provided administrative, legislative framework to protect and promote the interest of the Indigenous Assamese Population and has set 1971 as the cut off year for detection and deportation of immigrants from Assam.

CONCLUSION AND LEGACY

The 1983 Assembly election serves as a vital case study of how forcing official voting procedures despite deep local anxieties can actually spark ethnic violence. Rather than rehabilitating regional stability, the election acted as an institutional catalyst for sectarian polarization and administrative failure.

The social wounds of the 1983 violence deeply scarred Assam's collective psyche. The voice against the illegal settlers and the exclusion of their names from the state's electoral rolls, steady growth of polarization between Ethnic Assamese and religious minorities, birth of All Assam Minority Student Union, support of right wing Hindu political organization to the Assam movement, the imposed Assembly election of 1983, participation of Muslims in the election, occurrence of communal violence- all these led to the breaking down of age-old relationship between Assamese and Muslims in Assam and led to a demoralizing ambiance during Assembly Election of 1983. The entire movement has left scars in the minds of thousands in the land of Assam. In case of Assam, long lasting and multiple tensions finally culminated in the election massacres which were called a Hobbesian War of all against all. They testified so much to communalism as to the total breakdown of Governance" (D, Citha). While the unrest officially ended with the 1985 with the signing of the historic, tripartite Assam Accord, establishing March 25, 1971, as the strict cut-off for citizenship verification, the structural cleavages exacerbated by the election continued to dominate state politics. The social remembrance of the mobilization encompassing both major milestones and localized micro-events in political landscape of Assam are still

fresh in the minds of the millions of the people of Assam.

Furthermore, the ethnic and nativist rhetoric born during the Assam Movement spread beyond its borders, fueling anti-migrant mobilizations in nearby states like Tripura, Manipur, and Meghalaya. The movement was not only an important movement of Assam, but also became a point of reference for other immigrant/anti-migrant oriented conflicts in the North-Eastern States.

Myron Weiner Argued, "The anti-foreigner movement spilled across the borders of Assam into the nearby states of Tripura and Manipur. In Tripura indigenous tribal groups launched violent attacks against Bengali settlers, who, by now, outnumbered the locals and controlled the state government. And in neighbouring Manipur, Manipuri students attacked Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis, and the numerous and increasingly prosperous Nepali dairy and cattle farmers. India's entire northeast has been fragmented by the migrant-ethnic issue (Weiner, 1983). In conclusion, the 1983 electoral crisis illustrates that authorities value- strict deadlines over a genuine democratic agreement, rigid schedules over community consensus, can inadvertently entrench social and political divides it is supposed to fix.

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