

BORDERS WITHIN: THE POLITICS OF BELONGING AND DISPLACEMENT IN ASSAM

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Abstract

This study analyses the tangled dynamics of displacement, citizenship, and migration within Assam's borders, highlighting the ongoing crisis that has redefined the region's social and political landscape. Historically, colonial and post-Partition migration fueled tensions between migrant-origin populations—many of whom became integral to Assam's economy—and indigenous groups concerned for cultural survival. The introduction of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), alongside intensified eviction campaigns, has transformed citizenship into a precarious status for millions. Mass exclusions under the NRC and the religious criteria of the CAA have created cycles of statelessness and internal displacement, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities, women, and Bengali-origin Muslims. Administrative procedures, such as the recent shift to executive-led expulsion orders, risk bypassing due process and threatening fundamental rights. While development rhetoric is cited to justify evictions, affected populations are often denied rehabilitation and compensation, deepening poverty and insecurity. These policies and practices raise urgent questions about legal rights, democratic values, and who truly belongs. Amid ongoing contestation between indigenous and immigrant-origin groups, the study underscores the need for reforms that uphold constitutional protections, ensure participatory processes, and promote meaningful inclusion. Assam's experience with internal displacement mirrors global challenges, serving as a critical test for India's ability to balance identity, justice, and plural citizenship in a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: NRC, Eviction, Immigration, Citizenship, Displacement, Identity.

Introduction

Assam, a strategically located state in Northeast India, has long stood at the crossroads of migration, identity politics, and contested state policies. Owing to its geographical proximity to colonial-era East Bengal (later Bangladesh), the region became a focal point of British economic policies in the 19th century, particularly through large-scale migration initiatives aimed at expanding cultivation and resource extraction in the Brahmaputra Valley (Baruah, 1999). These demographic shifts initiated by colonial rule laid the foundation for persistent ethnic frictions and politicised claims over land and identity.

The immigration debate in Assam has consistently dominated its political landscape for over a century. Post-independence anxieties over cultural preservation and territorial integrity led to widespread political mobilisation, culminating in the Assam Movement (1979–1985) spearheaded by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU). This mass movement demanded the identification and removal of so-called “illegal immigrants,” especially those who arrived after March 24, 1971—a cut-off institutionalised in the Assam Accord (Weiner, 1983). However, the accord failed to fully resolve underlying identity-related tensions, which have continued to evolve in new forms over subsequent decades.

One such evolution occurred with the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019, which introduced a religious criterion to Indian citizenship by offering legal status to non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who entered

India before December 31, 2014. While positioned by the central government as a humanitarian act, Assamese civil society broadly interpreted it as a direct subversion of the Assam Accord and a demographic threat to indigenous rights (Gogoi, 2020). The concern in Assam transcended religious divisions, centring instead on fears of cultural erasure and political marginalisation due to further influxes of Bengali-speaking populations. Concurrently, the state has witnessed a surge in eviction drives, justified under various state-led objectives such as reclaiming government land, enforcing forest regulations, or facilitating development projects. However, these operations disproportionately affect historically marginalised groups, including Bengali-origin Muslims, Scheduled Tribes, and tea garden workers (Hazarika, 2016). The eviction episode in Sipajhar (Darrang district) in 2021—marked by police violence and civilian casualties—demonstrated the human cost of such policies (Boruah, 2022). Critics argue that these evictions are not merely administrative decisions but are deeply embedded in a larger political project of demographic management and exclusion (Jaya2013).

At the heart of Assam's political struggles lies a fundamental paradox: citizenship in the state remains contested, fragile, and conditional. Rather than serving as a guarantor of rights, citizenship in Assam is often wielded as a tool for exclusion, with vast sections of the population—particularly those excluded from the NRC—facing statelessness, stigma, and the threat of displacement (Sen 2019). This precarious citizenship reveals a significant contradiction within India's democratic framework, where ethnonationalist policies and administrative practices repeatedly undermine principles of equality and inclusion. The broader national implications of Assam's experiences are profound. They expose tensions between development goals and the rights of displaced communities, as well as the growing disjuncture between inclusive democratic ideals and selective belonging (Baruah, 2024). Although framed in developmental or environmental terms, many eviction drives effectively function as instruments of social and political control. Similarly, the CAA-NRC regime has turned the legal notion of citizenship into a volatile, exclusionary mechanism, casting millions into bureaucratic uncertainty.

This article seeks to examine Assam's complex interplay of migration, citizenship, and eviction through a critical, rights-based lens. It aims to contextualise the historical roots of immigration-related tensions, evaluate the impact of the CAA-NRC framework on notions of citizenship and belonging, analyse state-led eviction as a form of political and spatial marginalisation, and explore the socio-political consequences of these processes on democracy and human rights. By framing Assam's citizenship crisis as an internal border conflict, this analysis underscores how national borders are symbolically redrawn within the state, producing internal zones of exclusion for those who remain physically present in India but are rendered stateless or politically invisible (Baruah, 1999). In doing so, it highlights the urgent need for a more inclusive, just, and democratic approach to diversity and belonging in the Indian polity.

Tracing the Roots of Immigration in Assam

The socio-political fabric of Assam has been intricately shaped by successive waves of migration, making immigration a defining and contentious aspect of its history. Unlike many other Indian states, Assam's demographic transformation was engineered mainly during the British colonial period, particularly after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, when the region came under British control. The colonial administration, in its bid to expand the imperial economy, introduced large-scale migration to exploit Assam's agrarian potential and natural

resources (Bardoloi, 2012). This included the forced or incentivised movement of tribal labourers from central India, primarily from Chotanagpur and Odisha, into Assam's tea plantations—laying the foundation for the contemporary “tea tribe” population (Guha, 1991). Simultaneously, Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal were invited to cultivate the underutilised char lands in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, resulting in a significant demographic and cultural shift in the region (Weiner, 1983).

These demographic shifts under colonial rule, though economically beneficial to the British, planted the seeds of ethno-linguistic anxieties among the indigenous Assamese population. Concerns about linguistic and cultural marginalisation began to surface as Assamese speakers found themselves outnumbered in several districts (Goswami, 2002). The Partition of 1947 exacerbated these fears, as communal violence in East Pakistan triggered the migration of Hindu Bengalis into Assam. Although these migrants were refugees fleeing persecution, their arrival intensified the sense of demographic insecurity among Assamese communities (Gupta, 2014). The state now found itself burdened with the dual responsibility of humanitarian accommodation and the preservation of indigenous political identity.

Despite the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950, which aimed to stabilise the situation by regulating migration and protecting minorities, porous borders made effective control nearly impossible (Hazarika, 1994). Over the following decades, Assam continued to experience an influx of migrants due to political unrest and economic instability in East Pakistan, deepening the perception among Assamese communities that they were being overwhelmed both culturally and politically. The crisis reached a critical point during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, which resulted in an estimated ten million refugees fleeing to India, many of whom entered Assam (Datta, 1998). While a large portion of these refugees returned post-independence, many remained, altering local demographics and reinforcing long-standing ethnic anxieties (Baruah, 2005). This event eventually led to the establishment of March 24, 1971, as the official cut-off date for determining citizenship under the Assam Accord.

This backdrop of cumulative migration waves laid the foundation for the Assam Movement between 1979 and 1985, led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), which demanded the identification and deportation of undocumented migrants (Murshid, 2016). The movement reflected deep-seated fears over land, identity, and political representation. It was marked by large-scale mobilisations, civil unrest, and tragic events like the Nellie massacre of 1983, where over 2,000 people—mostly Bengali-origin Muslims—were killed (Hazarika, 1994). The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, which legally institutionalised the March 24, 1971, cut-off date, seen by many as a political compromise to safeguard Assamese identity (Baruah, 2005).

Despite the symbolic victory represented by the Accord, it did not resolve the structural complexities of migration, documentation, and identity in Assam. In the years that followed, successive governments failed to implement its terms, leading to ongoing discontent. The rise of insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) further politicised the issue by framing immigration as part of a broader narrative of marginalisation by the Indian state (Misra, 2000). Communities of Bengali-origin Muslims, even those with deep-rooted ties to Assam, continued to face suspicion and were frequently subjected to stereotyping as “illegal migrants” regardless of their legal status (Samaddar, 1999).

The long history of immigration in Assam, therefore, must be understood not just as a sequence of population movements but as an evolving site of political contestation and identity formation. From colonial exploitation to post-independence refugee crises, and from ethno-linguistic mobilisations to the codification of citizenship through the Assam Accord, each phase reveals how immigration has continuously shaped Assam's regional politics and social hierarchies. These historical experiences remain critical for interpreting current debates surrounding the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the NRC, and ongoing eviction drives, all of which reflect more profound anxieties about identity, belonging, and statehood within the Indian democratic framework.

Citizenship, Identity and Contested Belonging

In Assam, citizenship has never been a purely legal category—it has evolved as a complex site of negotiation between identity, history, and political power. While the Indian Constitution laid out a vision of secular, inclusive citizenship under Articles 5–11 and further operationalised through the Citizenship Act of 1955 (Jayal, 2013), Assam has consistently stood as an exception. Here, the discourse around citizenship is shaped less by constitutional egalitarianism and more by anxieties around cultural preservation, demographic shifts, and perceived threats to indigenous identity (Thaoson, 2012). These concerns have driven a political climate in which citizenship becomes a contested marker of belonging, subject to frequent reinterpretation depending on shifting socio-political imperatives (Goswami, 2002).

This dynamic was starkly evident in the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was initially a post-Partition enumeration exercise conducted in 1951 but lay dormant for decades. Following persistent pressure from Assamese civil society and student organisations, the Supreme Court directed the update of the NRC in 2013 (Gogoi, 2020). The updated NRC required individuals to prove ancestry in Assam before the cut-off date of March 24, 1971, as established by the Assam Accord. However, this technical requirement placed a disproportionate burden on marginalised populations, many of whom lacked sufficient documentation due to poverty, displacement, or illiteracy. The exclusion of over 1.9 million people from the final NRC list in 2019 raised fears of statelessness and large-scale disenfranchisement (Sen, 2019).

The NRC was intended as a tool to fulfil longstanding demands of Assamese nationalists for the identification of “illegal migrants,” particularly those perceived to be from Bangladesh. However, its outcomes proved deeply problematic. A significant number of those excluded were not recent migrants but individuals unable to furnish the necessary documents—women, children, and historically disadvantaged communities bore the brunt of the exclusions (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This exposed the humanitarian cost of administratively defining citizenship through rigid and exclusionary procedures. Further complicating Assam's citizenship politics was the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA), which offered a fast-track to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who had entered India before December 31, 2014. Nationally, this was framed as a humanitarian measure to protect religious minorities. Yet in Assam, the CAA was met with widespread backlash—not because of its religious framing, but because it directly contradicted the Assam Accord by legitimising post-1971 migrants (Gogoi, 2020). For Assamese civil society, the CAA represented a dilution of the fragile demographic balance and a betrayal of a historical agreement aimed at protecting indigenous cultural and political rights (Baruah, 2020).

Unlike protests elsewhere in India that focused on the CAA's religious bias, opposition in Assam emphasised regional identity and the fear of cultural erasure. The local slogan "CAA, not accepted" underscored how the issue transcended religion and centred on safeguarding Assamese identity. This divergence in protest narratives underscores the complex nature of identity politics in the region, where local concerns often conflict with national ideologies.

At the heart of this conflict lies the binary between indigenous and immigrant identities. Assamese identity has historically been constructed through linguistic, cultural, and territorial parameters. Many indigenous groups—particularly Assamese-speaking Hindus and tribal communities—perceive immigration as a demographic threat that undermines their socio-political standing and access to resources (Baruah, 1978). In contrast, migrant-origin communities, especially Bengali Muslims and Hindus, frame their narratives around belonging, rootedness, and generational presence in Assam. They challenge the dominant discourses that label them as outsiders and highlight the lived realities that connect them to the region (Samaddar, 1999).

This struggle over identity and legitimacy has not only influenced policy but has also shaped Assam's electoral landscape. Regional political parties, such as the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), emerged from the Assam Movement, mobilising mass support around anti-immigration sentiments (Singh, 2024). National parties, notably the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have also capitalised on these sentiments by promising stricter immigration controls and advocating for measures like the NRC. Conversely, parties representing migrant-origin communities have focused on securing legal protections, gaining recognition, and resisting exclusionary state practices. Electoral competition, therefore, increasingly mirrors identity-based cleavages rather than developmental or ideological alignments. The frequent targeting of Bengali-origin Muslim settlements in eviction drives, often justified as land reclamation or development, reflects how citizenship anxieties are manipulated for political gain (Boruah, 2022).

Fundamentally, these developments reveal that citizenship in Assam functions as both a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. While theoretically a guarantor of equal rights, in practice, it has been used to differentiate populations based on ethnicity, language, and perceived indigeneity. The paradox is acute: while the NRC was designed to identify and exclude, the CAA simultaneously offered selective inclusion—albeit along religious lines. These contradictory processes have created overlapping categories of exclusion, where the NRC may exclude individuals and yet not be protected by the CAA, or vice versa (Roy, 2016).

Civil society, too, remains deeply divided in Assam's citizenship discourse. On one hand, student bodies and regional intellectuals have long mobilised around the perceived need to protect Assamese identity, often aligning with exclusionary policies (Weiner, 1983). On the other hand, human rights groups have drawn attention to the humanitarian crisis emerging from policies like the NRC and eviction drives. Reports have documented the trauma of statelessness, the inhumane conditions in detention centres, and the erosion of rights for those excluded from formal citizenship frameworks (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This dual activism underscores the

Power, Land, Exclusion, and Dynamics of Evictions

The circumstance of eviction in Assam has evolved into a core aspect of the state's deeply contested identity politics, intersecting with broader discourse around immigration, citizenship, and indigeneity. While successive governments have justified eviction drives on legal, environmental, or developmental grounds, the implementation of these policies reveals a pattern of selective targeting—particularly toward marginalised communities, most notably Bengali-origin Muslims. These state-led evictions, rather than being neutral administrative actions, often function as tools of demographic management and political signalling, reinforcing longstanding anxieties over cultural preservation and territorial sovereignty (Hussain, 2000).

Land occupies a central place in the Assamese socio-political imagination. The Brahmaputra Valley, known for its fertile plains, is not only an economic asset but also a symbol of Assamese cultural and linguistic identity. Historical migration, first encouraged during colonial rule and later amplified by post-Partition refugee flows, dramatically altered the region's demographic fabric. Colonial administrators brought Bengali-speaking peasants into the area to cultivate char lands, initiating a pattern of migration that over time generated resentment among the indigenous population (Guha, 1977). This tension has continued to frame land disputes as ethnic confrontations. The Assam Accord of 1985, while addressing citizenship issues with a cut-off date of March 24, 1971, failed to resolve questions of land ownership and settlement. As a result, land encroachment remains a deeply politicised and ethnically charged issue (Hussain, 2013).

In recent years, the scale and frequency of eviction drives in Assam have increased, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government. These actions have been promoted as efforts to reclaim government land, protect forest areas, or clear char regions for agricultural development. However, studies and journalistic investigations reveal that those most affected by these evictions are often impoverished Bengali-origin Muslims who lack formal land titles or documentation due to systemic exclusion (Saikia, 2021). While officials cite legal grounds for these operations, critics argue that the selective nature of enforcement and lack of rehabilitation efforts reflect deeper biases (Amnesty International, 2022).

A particularly stark example occurred in September 2021 in the Sipajhar area of Darrang district. A state-sponsored eviction drive led to violent clashes, resulting in the death of two civilians, including a minor. The incident sparked nationwide outrage when video footage surfaced showing a government-assigned photographer stomping on the corpse of a protester moments after the killing. The image, widely circulated in the media, came to symbolise the state's brutal approach to eviction and the dehumanisation of those it targets. Rights groups and civil society condemned the violence as indicative of systematic targeting and a broader erosion of democratic norms (The Hindu, 2021).

Evictions are often framed within a discourse of development. The government justifies clearing settlements as necessary to implement infrastructure projects or redistribute land to unemployed Assamese youth. However, such framing masks the inequitable impact of these actions. Those displaced are rarely provided with alternative housing, compensation, or access to services. Rather than enabling inclusive growth, such evictions deepen marginalisation and inequality, perpetuating a pattern in which development is skewed in

favour of one community at the expense of another (Chakravorty, 2016). This reveals a political use of development discourse that legitimises state violence under the guise of progress.

From a legal and constitutional standpoint, these evictions raise serious concerns. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life and dignity, which has been interpreted by the Supreme Court to include the right to shelter, notably in the landmark *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985) case. International human rights frameworks, including the UN's Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-Based Evictions, prohibit forced evictions without adequate rehabilitation. Despite this, eviction operations in Assam are often carried out without notice, legal process, or post-eviction support, violating both domestic and international norms (HRW, 2020).

Critically, eviction in Assam must be understood as a mechanism of identity-based governance. The discourse around “illegal encroachers” is often mobilised to project the state as a protector of Assamese identity. This aligns with long-standing cultural fears of demographic dilution, wherein migration is viewed not as a humanitarian issue but as an artistic and territorial threat. Eviction thus becomes a symbolic assertion of control, reinforcing the exclusionary logic of earlier measures, such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), both of which sought to determine who legitimately belongs in Assam (Jayal, 2019).

The social consequences of eviction are profound and multi-dimensional. Families are uprooted from their homes, often overnight, and relocated to temporary shelters with inadequate access to food, clean water, healthcare, or education. The disruption of children's education, the loss of agrarian livelihoods, and the breakdown of social networks compound the trauma of displacement. Health crises frequently emerge due to unsanitary conditions, while women and girls face heightened risks of violence and exploitation in camps. These conditions produce what some scholars describe as “internal refugees”—citizens rendered stateless in all but name, trapped in cycles of insecurity and marginalisation within their own country (Hussain, 2019).

The recent eviction drives in Assam have become one of the most contentious developments in the state, exposing deep tensions between land rights, identity, and constitutional protections. Since 2021, the BJP-led government has reclaimed over 12,000 hectares of land, with clearances peaking at 4,397 hectares in 2022–23, followed by 3,402 hectares in 2023–24, 962 hectares in 2024–25, and more than 638 hectares by July 2025 (Guwahati Observer, 2025). These operations have displaced more than 50,000 people, many of whom held government documents or were beneficiaries of welfare schemes (India Today, 2025). Some of the most significant actions occurred in Golaghat's Rengma Reserve Forest, where nearly 1,500 families were uprooted in July 2025, clearing 11,000 bighas (1,500 hectares), followed by another 230 families in a second phase (Eastern Mirror, 2025). Similar drives affected 3,300 families in Goalpara in a single month, 309 families in Biswanath (175 bighas), and over 350 households in Nambor South Reserve Forest (1,000 bighas) (Times of India, 2025). Altogether, more than 160 sq. km of land have been cleared in four years (Indian Express, 2025).

The government justifies these operations through the Assamese nationalist slogan *jaati, maati, bheti* (community, land, hearth), arguing that evictions protect indigenous rights,

restore forests, and counter demographic “invasion” linked to migration from Bangladesh. Supporters also cite Guwahati High Court directives to remove encroachments. Yet critics argue that the drives disproportionately target Bengali-speaking Muslims, often derogatorily called “Miya,” and are politically timed to consolidate Assamese support before elections (People’s Democracy, 2025). Human rights groups note that many displaced persons were lawful citizens, making mass bulldozing without rehabilitation a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution (Washington Centre, 2025).

Beyond humanitarian fallout, questions arise about the ultimate use of reclaimed land. In Goalpara, cleared land was linked to a 3,400 MW thermal power project, while 3,000 bighas were reportedly allocated to a cement company in a Sixth Schedule area (Times of India, 2025). Neighbouring Nagaland has tightened border vigilance against displaced families, and India deported over 300 people to Bangladesh in 2025, intensifying fears of statelessness (Economic Times, 2025). Thus, Assam’s eviction drives cannot be reduced to administrative land recovery. They embody the contested nexus of citizenship, identity, and resource politics, revealing how state power, electoral strategy, and ethnic anxieties converge to shape one of the most volatile political landscapes in India (Sharma, 2023).

Tracing the Human Burden of Displacement

The deeply entangled politics of immigration, eviction, and citizenship in Assam cannot be reduced to abstract constitutional debates or administrative processes; they bear direct and devastating consequences on real lives. Across the state, thousands of individuals—many of whom have resided in Assam for generations—face an ongoing crisis of displacement that erodes their access to land, livelihood, shelter, and dignity. This persistent cycle of exclusion, driven by state-led eviction drives, bureaucratic omissions such as those in the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and anxieties over ethnic identity, has created a growing population of what scholars describe as “internal refugees”—citizens without recognition, protection, or belonging (Dutt, 2024).

In Assam, land functions as both a source of economic sustenance and cultural identity, particularly for agrarian communities residing on the Brahmaputra’s char areas. These riverine sandbars, although ecologically fragile, support thousands of families who rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods. When eviction operations displace them from these lands, they are not merely losing property; they are also deprived of their only means of survival. Many displaced individuals are subsequently absorbed into informal economies, where they work as daily wage labourers, tea garden workers, or construction helpers, often under exploitative conditions and facing job insecurity (Saikia, 2021). The exclusion from the NRC has compounded this precarity, as individuals with uncertain citizenship status are denied access to state welfare schemes, public employment, and land titles, creating a climate of legal and economic marginalisation (HRW, 2020).

The most immediate and visible impact of forced displacement is the destruction of homes. Evictions in Assam are often carried out with little or no notice, accompanied by state machinery that demolishes entire settlements overnight. The violent nature of these operations was exemplified by the Sipajhar incident in 2021, where bulldozers razed hundreds of houses and families were rendered homeless without any resettlement assistance (The Hindu, 2021). Following eviction, displaced individuals are frequently left to inhabit makeshift shelters—tents, roadside encampments, or flood-prone areas—lacking access to clean water, sanitation, electricity, or secure tenure. The absence of rehabilitation frameworks

reflects a systemic disregard for the displaced, especially during monsoons when temporary structures are often destroyed by floods (Sultana, 2025).

Displacement also interrupts access to basic services such as education. When communities are uprooted, schools become physically inaccessible, and the instability of camp life forces many children to drop out. In such conditions, education is deprioritised as families shift their focus to immediate survival needs (Ghoshal, 2023). Moreover, children from families excluded from the NRC often face institutional barriers to schooling, with some schools requiring proof of citizenship for enrollment. This not only violates the constitutional guarantee of the right to education but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion across generations. The health implications of displacement are similarly severe. Camps for evicted families lack healthcare infrastructure, contributing to the spread of communicable diseases and maternal health crises. Malnutrition, especially among children and pregnant women, is rampant due to the sudden loss of food security following displacement. Research indicates that eviction-affected communities in Assam exhibit higher incidences of stunting, undernutrition, and anaemia than state averages—problems worsened by inadequate public health outreach in these marginal zones (Hazarika, 2016). Without formal recognition or residency documentation, these populations also face barriers to accessing public health services.

Displacement also disproportionately affects women, compounding gender-based vulnerabilities. Women in eviction camps face increased risks of exploitation, harassment, and domestic violence. With the collapse of household structures and income sources, many are forced into insecure labour or dependency. Reports have also observed a rise in early marriages among displaced families, as parents attempt to reduce economic burdens by marrying off daughters prematurely. Girls, in particular, suffer from educational discontinuity post-displacement, and women bear the responsibility of managing domestic tasks like food, water, and caregiving under dire conditions. In addition, the NRC process has exposed gendered discrepancies in documentation; many rural women, especially in Muslim and tribal communities, lack ancestral papers or land records, making them more susceptible to exclusion (Joyal, 2019).

Beyond the physical and economic toll, displacement inflicts profound psychological and social damage. Being labelled as “outsiders” or “illegal migrants” leads to societal ostracisation, even when individuals possess documentary proof of long-term residency or citizenship. The anxiety induced by constant threats of eviction, legal uncertainty, or detention fosters chronic mental stress. Children growing up in displacement camps internalise insecurity and alienation, while adults struggle with the trauma of lost homes, shattered dignity, and social invisibility (Samaddar, 1999). The cumulative effect is a population in limbo—stripped of belonging in both material and emotional terms.

These conditions give rise to a category of people whose legal status may fall within the boundaries of Indian citizenship, but whose lived experiences reflect exclusion and statelessness. Displaced Assamese residents, particularly those of Bengali Muslim origin, often settle on the peripheries of urban centres or riverine fringes, forming informal settlements with no legal or civic recognition. Without access to property rights, voter registration, or welfare services, they remain outside the protection of the very state that claims them as citizens (Hazarika, 1994). Their existence as “internal refugees” illustrates the

hollowing out of citizenship in practice, where legal status does not translate into substantive rights or state accountability.

Civil society organisations and local advocacy groups have attempted to intervene by documenting eviction-related abuses, providing humanitarian relief, and pursuing legal recourse. Human Rights Watch (2020), for instance, has highlighted the discriminatory implementation of eviction policies and their disproportionate impact on marginalised communities. Grassroots groups have distributed food and tents, offered legal aid, and lobbied for moratoriums on forced eviction. However, these initiatives are constrained by limited resources and political resistance. While some student groups like the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) have historically defended the rights of indigenous populations, few mainstream organisations have actively championed the rights of displaced communities deemed "outsiders" by dominant identity discourses (Deb, 2025).

In essence, the humanitarian toll of displacement in Assam reveals the violent underside of identity-based governance. Far from resolving historical grievances, eviction drives and exclusionary citizenship processes intensify structural marginalisation, stripping individuals of both legal protections and societal inclusion. The displaced are not merely landless—they are voiceless in a system that denies them participation, stability, and dignity. The crisis, therefore, is not only a logistical or humanitarian emergency but a deeper political and ethical failure. In a constitutional democracy that promises equality and inclusion, the treatment of Assam's displaced challenges the very foundations of citizenship, rights, and justice.

Negotiating Belonging: Democracy, Development, Citizenship, and Negotiated Belonging

In Assam, the intersection of immigration, citizenship, and eviction reflects a more profound crisis in the functioning of democracy and the promises of development. While citizenship is meant to secure democratic rights and participation, and growth is often projected as inclusive progress, both have become exclusionary mechanisms in the region. Democratic ideals are being compromised as marginalised groups are systematically excluded through legal and bureaucratic processes, while development is often implemented at the cost of displacing vulnerable populations (Barbora, 2019). Despite the presence of electoral processes, substantive democracy—grounded in social justice, inclusion, and dignity—remains weak. The NRC exercise, which excluded nearly 1.9 million individuals, along with mass evictions, has disenfranchised thousands, undermining their participation in democratic life (Baruah, 2020). These exclusions highlight the gap between democratic theory and practice, where citizenship is not guaranteed by residence or belonging but by proving one's ancestry—often through inaccessible documentation.

Development narratives have further legitimised displacement. Projects framed as necessary for agricultural reform, conservation, or infrastructure are used to justify the eviction of communities, especially Bengali-origin Muslims living on char lands. The Sipajhar evictions of 2021 and displacements near Kaziranga exemplify how development often benefits dominant groups while forcing marginalised populations into more profound insecurity (Hazarika, 2016). This instrumental use of development, which is intended to enhance well-being, instead amplifies exclusion and social fragmentation. Citizenship itself has become a contested and politicised category. While indigenous Assamese communities seek protection of their land and culture, immigrant-origin groups struggle for recognition

and security. State policies like the NRC and CAA attempt to mediate these demands but often deepen divisions rather than resolve them. The CAA, in particular, has undermined the Assam Accord while institutionalising religious discrimination, revealing the selective application of citizenship rights (Gogoi, 2020).

Civil society responses reflect these tensions. While groups like AASU champion indigenous rights, human rights organisations push back against discriminatory policies and highlight the plight of displaced communities. However, civil society remains fragmented—often divided along identity lines—limiting its capacity to advocate for inclusive citizenship and universal rights. The judiciary and media have also played ambiguous roles. Courts, while central to processes like the NRC, have often failed to safeguard the rights of the excluded, especially regarding rehabilitation after evictions (Sen, 2019). Similarly, mainstream media has tended to reinforce exclusionary narratives, casting marginalised communities as “illegal” or “encroachers,” while independent outlets have tried to expose the human costs of these policies.

These dynamics are not unique to Assam; they echo exclusionary citizenship practices across South Asia, such as the treatment of Rohingya in Myanmar or Tamil workers in Sri Lanka. However, what makes Assam distinct is that these exclusions occur within a functioning democratic framework, exposing stark contradictions between constitutional ideals and lived realities (Buragohain, 2025). The cumulative effect is a deep erosion of rights and dignity. Displacement severs access to housing, education, health, and livelihoods—fundamental aspects of both development and democracy. Citizenship, instead of being inclusive and equal, is increasingly shaped by identity, ancestry, and political agendas (Amartya Sen’s (1999) view of development as the expansion of freedoms is contradicted in Assam, where policies restrict freedom, security, and participation for many.

In conclusion, Assam exemplifies the delicate balance between democracy, development, and citizenship. While electoral democracy persists, the systematic exclusion of communities—through legal, political, and developmental tools—undermines its legitimacy. Proper democratic governance must move beyond procedural formalities and embrace inclusive citizenship, equitable development, and respect for human rights. Assam’s future, and the credibility of Indian democracy as a whole, will depend on how it addresses these contradictions and reimagines belonging in more just and inclusive terms.

Findings and Reflections

The ongoing crisis in Assam, shaped by overlapping issues of immigration, contested citizenship, and forced eviction, reveals a complex interplay of historical grievances, political interests, and identity-based anxieties. What emerges is not merely a regional problem but a broader reflection of how democracy, development, and belonging are negotiated—and often undermined—within a constitutional framework. Immigration into Assam has long carried dual implications. Historically, the influx of labourers from East Bengal and central India helped sustain Assam’s agricultural expansion and tea economy under colonial rule (Guha, 1991). Even today, these migrant-origin communities remain vital to the informal labour economy and agrarian productivity. Yet, this economic integration coexists with deep-seated fears of cultural dilution and demographic marginalisation among indigenous groups. These tensions have sustained a persistent view of migrants as both economic contributors and existential threats (Misra, 2023). This contradiction lies at the core of the region’s enduring political instability.

Citizenship, central to democratic belonging, has similarly functioned as both a tool of inclusion and a mechanism of exclusion. The Assam Accord, with its cut-off date of 1971, introduced a temporal boundary to belonging, making citizenship contingent on ancestral documentation rather than lived presence (Weiner, 1983). The NRC process intensified this exclusion, especially impacting poor, rural, and marginalised groups who often lack the documentary evidence required to prove lineage. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), while ostensibly humanitarian, further complicated the landscape by granting fast-tracked citizenship to specific religious groups—excluding Muslims—while also violating the Assam Accord’s foundational principles (Gogoi, 2020). This selective application of citizenship law reflects a politicised understanding of identity and belonging, where democracy becomes a contested terrain rather than a shared space of rights. Eviction, framed by the state as a necessary administrative or developmental measure, has increasingly functioned as a form of demographic control. Drives targeting so-called “illegal encroachments” have disproportionately displaced Bengali-origin Muslims, even when many have lived in Assam for generations with legitimate claims to residence (Das, 1999). These actions serve a dual purpose: they signal political allegiance to indigenous identity protection and simultaneously reshape settlement patterns in line with the interests of the majority. Events such as the 2021 Sipajhar evictions, which resulted in loss of life and homes, reveal how state violence intersects with identity politics to marginalise particular groups under the guise of law enforcement (The Hindu, 2021).

The development narrative used to justify such actions is deeply paradoxical. While eviction is often rationalised as necessary for agricultural reform, conservation, or infrastructure, the affected communities rarely benefit from such progress. Instead, they face heightened poverty, insecurity, and exclusion (Saikia, 2021). As Sen (1999) argues, real development must be assessed through the lens of freedom and capability expansion, not just economic outcomes. In Assam, however, development initiatives often erode freedoms and perpetuate inequality, mainly when they are used to justify displacement. This crisis also exposes a critical tension between procedural and substantive democracy. On paper, Assam enjoys regular elections, vibrant political competition, and an active civil society. But in practice, millions live under threat of statelessness or homelessness, excluded from welfare, education, and even the right to vote (Baruah, 2005). The gap between institutional participation and lived exclusion undermines the legitimacy of democratic governance. Political campaigns increasingly centre on identity politics rather than inclusive development, turning NRC promises or anti-CAA rhetoric into tools of electoral mobilisation (Gogoi, 2020).

The humanitarian consequences of this crisis are severe. Displacement has stripped individuals of their livelihoods, housing, healthcare, and education. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence in eviction camps. Those excluded from citizenship face social stigma, chronic fear, and psychological trauma, often being labelled “foreigners” in the only homeland they have ever known. These communities, although remaining within India’s borders, are effectively treated as stateless—what scholars have called “internal refugees” (Ragi, 2016). While Assam’s situation mirrors patterns seen elsewhere—such as the exclusion of Tamils in Sri Lanka or the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar—it is uniquely situated within a democratic polity that claims to uphold equality before the law. This contradiction makes the crisis even more troubling. India’s global image

as the world's largest democracy is undermined when exclusionary citizenship laws, identity-based evictions, and mass displacements become normalised (Barcley, 2025).

Addressing this crisis requires a shift in both policy and political vision. Legal and administrative actions must prioritise human rights, ensuring evictions comply with constitutional guarantees, including proper notice, fair compensation, and meaningful rehabilitation. Citizenship policies must be reoriented toward inclusion, acknowledging the lived realities of communities rather than imposing rigid documentary requirements. Development should focus on empowering marginalised groups—such as char dwellers and tea tribes—through participatory planning, rather than displacing them in the name of progress (Saikia, 2021). The path forward must involve moving beyond binary identity narratives. Reconciliation can only occur if democracy in Assam is reframed not as a struggle of “us” versus “them,” but as a collective project of coexistence grounded in justice and equality. The survival of democratic ideals in Assam—and indeed in India as a whole—depends on the state's ability to balance cultural identity with inclusive citizenship and equitable development.

In conclusion, the Assam crisis underscores how immigration, citizenship, and eviction intersect to produce systemic displacement within national borders. These processes are deeply political, shaping who belongs and who does not in a country that promises equality for all. As development is used to justify displacement and democracy functions more as an electoral formality than an inclusive practice, the very fabric of Indian constitutionalism is put to the test. To restore democratic legitimacy and social harmony, Assam must chart a path toward policies rooted in rights, inclusion, and shared belonging—rather than fear and exclusion.

Conclusion

Assam's crisis over immigration, citizenship, and eviction is rooted in decades of historical and political tension. Colonial labour migration and post-Partition influxes made migrant-origin populations vital to Assam's economy, yet marked them as cultural and political threats by indigenous groups, intensifying anxieties about demographic change (Guha, 1991). The Assam Accord, with its 1971 cut-off date, imposed temporality as the primary criterion for citizenship, institutionalising exclusion for many residents. The NRC update in 2019 operationalised this, leaving nearly two million—mostly women and marginalised people—outside citizenship rolls, revealing the precariousness when identity and legal status hinge on documentary proof. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) further complicated matters. By making religion a basis for citizenship, it contradicted secular constitutional principles and the Assam Accord, drawing resistance from both indigenous and immigrant-origin communities (Gogoi, 2020). These legal moves have led to mass exclusion and reinforced bureaucratic obstacles, especially for minorities and women who lack paperwork or family histories linked to official records. Bengali-origin Muslims have faced the brunt of ongoing eviction drives, justified as development or anti-encroachment, resulting in tens of thousands being uprooted with little recourse or rehabilitation (The Hindu, 2021). Many become “internal refugees,” living in legal and social limbo without access to fundamental rights or citizenship protections.

Assam's procedural democracy—with frequent elections and active political debate—is undermined by the erosion of substantive justice and equality. Instead, citizenship itself has become a stratifying mechanism, pitting insiders against outsiders, while both exclusionary

and inclusive actors claim the mantle of democracy and rights (Jayal, 2013). The recent adoption of a new SOP under the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, further shifts the determination of citizenship from quasi-judicial Foreigners' Tribunals to executive officers, speeding up expulsions and limiting safeguards. Suspected "foreigners" are given ten days to prove citizenship before facing immediate expulsion—a timeline widely criticised as unrealistic for the poor, marginalised, or flood-displaced, lacking appeals and clear safeguards. The Foreigners Tribunal system itself remains deeply flawed: over 165,000 have been declared "foreigners" as of 2025, with over 85,000 more cases pending and NRC appeals languishing. Studies document arbitrary decisions, wholesale rejection of evidence, and little adherence to due process, producing statelessness, detention, and severe rights violations. Detention centres are overcrowded, lack basic amenities, and those detained lose access to employment, healthcare, and even communication with family, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and trauma. Development, often used as a justification for eviction and displacement, rarely leads to meaningful rehabilitation. Char dwellers, farmers, and tribal communities are uprooted for infrastructure and conservation projects but seldom compensated or resettled, counter to Amartya Sen's idea that development should expand freedoms, not curtail them—the lack of participatory planning results in persistent poverty, insecurity, and further marginalisation.

Ultimately, Assam's crisis centres on the contested meaning of belonging—who is Assamese, and who is Indian? Indigenous fears of cultural extinction clash with immigrant-origin communities' struggle for dignity and recognition. The CAA's selective inclusion and exclusion deepen this rift, undermining both the Assam Accord and constitutional equality. Resolving Assam's crisis demands reforms that ensure constitutional safeguards, inclusive documentation criteria, fair appeals, and participatory development—rooted not in exclusion, but in justice and dignity for all. The failure to do so risks India's claim to genuine democratic pluralism, with millions' rights and futures hanging in the balance.

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