

Defining who is 'Assamese': attempts, challenges

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Recently, the Assamese government identified nearly 1.44 lakh illegal foreigners in assam until January 31, 2022.



[Ref: Indian Express]

Foreigner under the Assam Accord:

- The **Assam Accord** was signed in 1985 by the **Centre and the Assam government** with the **All-Assam Student Union (AASU)** and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad.
- As per the Accord, anyone who had come to Assam **before midnight of March 24, 1971** would be an **Indian citizen**, while those who had come after would be dealt with as foreigners.

Why is the definition of Assamese difficult?

- Assam's demography has been shaped by **decades of migration** dating back to the colonial era.
- A simple definition of Assamese people on the basis of language spoken **may exclude** someone whose family might have lived in Assam for 100 years.
- Axomiya or Assamese is a **contested phrase** and mean different to different sections of society.
 - Many feel people whose **ancestors were living in Assam before 1826**, when Assam was merged with British India, **are Axomiya**.
 - Others feel the word '**Axomiya**' means anyone who were **permanent residents of Assam before 1951**, when the first NRC was drawn up.
 - Still others feel **anyone speaking Assamese** (or any other indigenous language) is an **Axomiya**.
 - People from **Barak Valley**, where Bengali is the local language, would want Bengali-speaking residents of Assam to be included as "Assamese".

Attempts to define Assamese people:

- In a **failed attempt in 2015**, then Assembly Speaker of Assam prepared a report proposing that '**Assamese people**' be anyone belonging to the state who:
 - **Speaks the Assamese language or any tribal dialect of the state or local language** of the region or;
 - Has been **living in Assam since 1951 or earlier**.
- A **committee in 2020**, recommended that any person of:
 - **Indigenous tribal community** of Assam;
 - **Any other indigenous community** of Assam;
 - All other citizens of India **residing in the territory or Assam on or before** January 1, 1951 and;
 - **Descendants of these categories** would be considered Assamese.

Other terms for which no definition has been finalised:

Khilonjia:

- It refers to all **indigenous communities**.

Adi Basinda:

- It refers to '**Original inhabitants**', meaning the tribes who have lived for generations in Assam.
- This does not extend to tribal communities settled by the British during colonial rule, as even this is not a settled definition.