

Bangladeshi Migration to North-East India: Impacts on Demography, Ethnicity, Socio-Economics, Security, and Politics

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Abstract:

India shares a 4,096-km-long boundary with Bangladesh and similarly shares the highest number of immigrants from neighbouring South Asian countries. According to a 2009 U.N Department of Economic and Social Affairs report, India ranked ninth in terms of international migration. According to the World Migration Report 2020, India has received refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The migration corridor from Bangladesh to India ranked fourth among the top ten migration corridors in the world. Since the dawn of the twentieth century, India has experienced immigration from Bangladesh. The influx of such a large number of migrants, particularly in the border states has proved to be a huge challenge for India with serious implications for its resources and national security. It has substantially contributed to changing the demographic pattern in North-East India, where the locals feel overwhelmed by outsiders. Based on this background, this paper delves into the complex dynamics and far-reaching impacts of migration from Bangladesh to North-East India, exploring socio-economic, cultural, and security dimensions. It provides unique insights into demographic changes, identity politics, and policy challenges.

Keywords: Migration, Bangladeshi, North-East India, Socio-economic impact, Ethnic and political conflict, National Register of Citizens (NRC) and immigration.

INTRODUCTION

Migration has been a fundamental aspect of human history, profoundly shaping societies, cultures, and economies. Despite its significance, it is often overlooked as a process that influences social structures and historical trajectories (Bhagat, 2018). Broadly defined, migration refers to “the movement of human populations over distances” (Majumdar & Pritha, 2015, p. 87-91). It typically involves a permanent or semi-permanent change in residence, often accompanied by a shift in activities and lifestyle in the new location. Scott and Marshall (2009) describe migration as “the more or less permanent movement of individuals or groups across symbolic or political boundaries into new residential areas and communities.”

Migration can take two primary forms: internal and international. Internal migration refers to the movement of people within the same country, such as rural-to-urban migration, which is particularly common in developing nations. People often move from rural areas to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities, improved living standards, and access to education or healthcare. International migration, on the other hand, involves the movement of people across national borders. This can be driven by factors such as the search for better employment, fleeing conflict or persecution, or escaping environmental crises. International migration includes both emigration—when people move out of a country—and immigration—when people move into a country (Singh, 2009).

Several key factors drive migration, both within countries and across borders. Economic factors are among the most significant motivators. People often migrate in search of better employment

opportunities, higher wages, and improved living conditions. For many, migration offers a path to a better life, whether in a different region of their home country or in a foreign country. Social factors also play a crucial role. Family reunification, access to education, and marriage are all powerful reasons that drive people to relocate. In some cases, individuals may move to join family members, seek better educational opportunities, or start new lives with a partner. Political factors are another important driver of migration. Conflict, political instability, and persecution often force people to flee their home countries in search of safety and security. Refugees and asylum seekers are prime examples of how political turmoil can force individuals to migrate. Finally, environmental factors—such as natural disasters, climate change, and resource scarcity—can lead to displacement. People may be forced to migrate when their homes are destroyed by natural disasters, or when they can no longer sustain their livelihoods due to changing environmental conditions (Dakua et al., 2021).

Global migration trends reveal that migration continues to have a significant impact worldwide. As of recent estimates, approximately 3.6% of the global population, or about 281 million people, are international migrants. This figure represents the highest number of migrants since World War II, reflecting ongoing global challenges and opportunities (Education CRF). Migration is driven by a complex combination of factors, and the movement of people continues to reshape both sending and receiving countries. It contributes to demographic shifts, cultural exchanges, and economic transformations across the globe.

The ‘Migration Theory’ proposed by Lee (1966) explains migration as a function of push and pull factors. Push factors such as poverty, environmental degradation, and political instability compel individuals to leave their place of origin, while pull factors like employment opportunities and improved living conditions attract migrants to specific destinations (Bhat & Deshpande, 2023; Hugo, 1996:3-9). For instance, the USA-Mexico migration corridor exemplifies this dynamic, with Mexicans seeking economic opportunities in the United States, creating the largest migration corridor globally (McAuliffe & Ruhs, 2017).

In South Asia, Bangladesh presents a case of migration driven by acute socio-economic and environmental challenges. As one of the world’s most densely populated and poorest countries, Bangladesh faces frequent natural disasters, including floods, cyclones, and riverbank erosion, exacerbated by its deltaic geography (Dasgupta, 2007). These challenges, combined with limited economic opportunities, drive significant illegal migration to India, particularly to regions like North-East India.

Bangladesh’s proximity to India and their porous borders have made migration a persistent issue. While India serves as a pull factor with employment opportunities in agriculture, construction, and industry, the push factors in Bangladesh include poverty, environmental vulnerabilities, and socio-political instability (Ramachandran, 2005). This dynamic has created a substantial undocumented migrant population in India, estimated at 15.20 million, according to Manoharan (2012). States like Assam and West Bengal have seen considerable demographic shifts due to this migration, leading to tensions over cultural identity, ethnic diversity, and economic resources (Datta, 2004).

The role of intermediaries, often referred to as ‘Dalal,’ has further facilitated undocumented migration across the India-Bangladesh border. These networks use various legal and illegal methods to aid migration, underscoring the challenges in governance and border control (Ramachandran, 2005).

Environmental factors play a critical role in migration from Bangladesh. The impacts of climate change and global warming, including rising sea levels and increased flooding, are projected to exacerbate displacement. Studies suggest that by 2050, flooding in Bangladesh could affect 70 million people

annually, with up to 8% of low-lying areas becoming permanently inundated (USAID, 2000). Additionally, the loss of natural resources, including 95% of forests and 50% of wetlands, has led to demographic pressures and forced migration, often termed “environmental refugees” (Banjan, 2015).

The influx of Bangladeshi migrants into North-East India has profound implications. The region, marked by ethnic and cultural diversity, faces increased tensions over resource allocation, socio-economic disparities, and identity politics. Migration has intensified local grievances, contributing to communal, political, and economic instability (Basumatari, 2014).

This paper examines the impact of migration from Bangladesh into India, with a specific focus on North-East India. It explores the socio-economic and cultural challenges arising from illegal migration, highlighting issues of security, ethnic conflict, and governance. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy measures addressing migration management, border security, and regional development. By analysing these issues, the study contributes to ongoing debates on international migration and its implications for regional and national stability, offering insights for policymakers and stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a mixed methods approach to investigate the complex issue of Bangladeshi migration to Northeast India. It integrates both quantitative data analysis and qualitative insights from existing research to address the following areas: the push and pull factors driving migration; the economic impacts on local livelihoods, labour markets, and regional development; the social and cultural consequences, including issues of identity, integration, and community relations; and the security dimensions, covering border management, trafficking, and national security concerns.

To achieve its objectives, the paper primarily relies on secondary data collected from a variety of credible sources. Quantitative data will be drawn from official publications, such as economic surveys, the Census of India, and reports from the Government of Assam and the Government of India. This data will be analysed using statistical tools to measure trends in migration patterns, demographic changes, and economic impacts on local communities.

Qualitative insights will be gathered from secondary sources, including government reports, research articles, and publications from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These sources will provide context to the social and cultural aspects of migration, such as the integration of migrants into local communities, identity issues, and the potential for ethnic or religious tensions. Additionally, the paper will examine security-related data, including border management reports, intelligence assessments, and policy documents, to understand the implications of migration on national security, trafficking, and cross-border issues.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this research will offer a comprehensive analysis of the causes, impacts, and challenges of Bangladeshi migration to Northeast India, with particular attention to regional development and security concerns.

MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH TO INDIA

The first wave of migration from Bengal occurred in 1905, during the British division of the region under Lord Curzon. Another massive influx happened in 1947, during the partition of India and Pakistan. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which led to Bangladesh’s independence from East Pakistan, also contributed to a large number of refugees fleeing to India (Barman, 2004). Despite the long-standing nature of this migration, these migrants were not officially recognised as Bangladeshi until after 1971.

Migration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to the eastern and North-Eastern Regions of India has long been referred to as ‘illegal immigration,’ particularly following the 1947 partition. This period saw substantial numbers of Hindus fleeing East Pakistan to escape communal violence, a trend that intensified during the 1971 liberation war. In 1965, Assam’s Chief Minister reported that over a million “illegal Pakistani infiltrators” had entered eastern India between 1951 and 1961, with significant populations in Assam (220,961), West Bengal (459,494), Bihar (297,857), and Tripura (55,403) (Van Schendel, 2005:204; Deb, 2021:1). During 1964-65, thousands of Chakmas and Hajongs migrated to India due to the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam in Bangladesh, which led to ethnic conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These groups are now settled in Arunachal Pradesh. These migrations represent distinct instances of ‘forced migration’ driven by specific events, but illegal migration from Bangladesh to India continues.

Bangladesh remains one of the world’s most densely populated and economically disadvantaged nations. In 2001, its population was about 130 million, with a density of 881 individuals per square kilometres (Singh & Suman, 2016). World Bank projections estimate that if the fertility rate does not decline, the population will exceed 180 million by 2025 and 208 million by 2050 (World Bank, 2002). In 2002, the direct calorie intake method revealed that 44.3 percent (approximately 55.9 million people) lived below the absolute poverty line (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Furthermore, the country is highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, droughts, and riverbank erosion.

With a population that faces high levels of poverty, Bangladesh has become a significant provider of low-skilled labour. Many people migrate to seek both short- and long-term employment opportunities. While many long-term emigrants move to industrialised nations, such as the United Kingdom and North America, the labour markets of the Middle East in the 1970s became a key destination for Bangladeshis, a trend that expanded to Southeast Asia. Between 1976 and 2002, more than three million Bangladeshis sought work abroad (Siddiqui, 2001). In addition, a significant number of Bangladeshis have migrated clandestinely to India, a trend that persists.

The ongoing issue of illegal immigration has resulted in tensions between India and Bangladesh. India’s Border Security Force (BSF) has made efforts to repatriate undocumented Bangladeshi migrants, though these efforts are often blocked by Bangladesh’s Border Guards (BDR), which assert that these individuals are Indian citizens. Bangladeshi officials have consistently denied the presence of Bangladeshi nationals in India, as emphasised by former Foreign Minister Morshed Khan in a 2003 press conference: “There is not a single Bangladeshi migrant in India” (Rajeswar, 2003). Bangladesh has also accused India of forcibly removing Bengali-speaking Muslims and labeling them as Bangladeshi immigrants. This complex issue is further illustrated in a report by India’s Group of Ministers on National Security (2001):

“Illegal migration from across our borders has continued unabated for over five decades. We have yet to fully wake up to the implications of unchecked immigration for national security. Today, we have about 15 million Bangladeshis, 2.2 million Nepalese, 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamils, and about one lakh Tibetan migrants living in India... The massive illegal immigration poses a grave danger to our security, social harmony, and economic well-being” (GoM, 2001:60; PIB, 2001).

In 2003, then-Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani estimated that approximately 15 million Bangladeshis resided in India. A similar estimate was provided by the ‘Task Force on Border Management’ in 2000, which reported that around 300,000 Bangladeshis entered India illegally each year. The highest concentrations of Bangladeshi immigrants are found in Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar, particularly in districts like Murshidabad, South and North 24 Parganas, Nadia, and West Dinajpur, as well as in Assam’s Dhubri, Barpeta, Goalpara, Hailakandi, and Karimganj. In these areas, many migrants have

integrated into local communities. Between 1951 and 2001, the growth rates for Hindus and Muslims in West Bengal were recorded at 198.54 percent and 310.93 percent, respectively, with demographic shifts from 78.45 percent Hindus and 19.85 percent Muslims in 1951 to 72.47 percent Hindus and 25.25 percent Muslims by 2001 (Pramanik, 2008:142).

Reports from 2003 indicated that the Bangladeshi migrant population in Delhi was between 1.3 and 2.8 million, while in Mumbai, it was around 500,000. In 2007, 25,712 of the 500,000 Bangladeshis who entered India that year did not return after their visas expired. Similarly, between 1972 and 2005, about 1.2 million Bangladeshis arrived in India with proper documentation but did not return. In 2005, India managed to repatriate only 15,000 of them (The Indian Express, 2009). From 2006 to 2008, the Government of India deported thousands for visa overstays (Banjan, 2015; Prakash & Menon, 2011).

A Border Security Force (BSF) report from 2019 indicates that nearly 14,000 Bangladeshi nationals have been prevented from entering India since 2019. Between January 2019 and April 2022, 4,896 Bangladeshis were detained while attempting to cross the border illegally (ANI, 2022). In recent years, unrest in Bangladesh has led to increased attempts to cross into India, particularly among the Bangladeshi Hindu community. For example, in Sitalkuchi, West Bengal, over 1,000 Bangladeshis, mostly Hindus, attempted to cross into India, citing threats. Most were stopped by BSF personnel, though a few managed to enter through Petrapole, highlighting the dangerous conditions driving their migration.

A Border Security Force (BSF) report obtained by ANI highlights that since 2019, nearly 14,000 Bangladeshi nationals have been prevented from entering India at the Indo-Bangladesh border. The report states that 9,233 individuals were apprehended while attempting to return to Bangladesh after their ‘illegal’ stay in India (ANI, 2022). Additionally, between January 1, 2019, and April 28, 2022, at least 4,896 Bangladeshis were detained while trying to cross into India (Ibid).

Recent unrest in Bangladesh has further intensified migration attempts. Over 1,000 Bangladeshi nationals, primarily Hindus, recently attempted to cross into India at Sitalkuchi in West Bengal, citing significant threats. Most were repelled by BSF personnel, although some managed to enter through Petrapole, highlighting the violent circumstances that prompted their flight.

India and Bangladesh share a 4,096-km-long border, of which the South Bengal Frontier accounts for 913.32 km. More than 50 percent of this stretch remains unfenced or consists of riverine terrain, making it highly porous and challenging to secure (The Economic Times, 2024; Hindustan Times, 2024).

NORTH-EAST INDIA

The North-Eastern Region (NER) of India, which comprises eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—is bordered by five countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal. The region is strategically linked to the rest of India through a narrow 22 km land corridor in Siliguri, West Bengal often referred to as the “Chicken’s Neck.” Despite covering only 7.97% of India’s geographical area, the NER is home to 3.78% of the country’s population. This region is marked by significant ethnic diversity, which includes hill tribes, plain tribes, and a non-tribal population (MHA, 2024).

One of the most persistent challenges faced by the region is the issue of illegal immigration, particularly from Bangladesh. Some states in the NER have witnessed substantial population growth since India’s independence, largely due to this influx. In a 1998 report, Assam’s then Governor S.K. Sinha studied the impact of illegal migration and reported to the President of India, stating: “It is unfortunate that to this

day, after half a century of independence, we have chosen to remain virtually oblivious to the grave danger to our national security arising from this unabated influx of illegal migrants” (Sinha, 1998).

The history of migration from Bangladesh to India dates back to 1947, when many, particularly Hindus, fled to Assam and West Bengal to escape the violence inflicted by the Pakistani military in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The movement escalated during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, with an estimated 10 million people migrating to India (Chowdhury, 2014). While many migrants returned after the war, a significant number stayed behind. Those who crossed into India on or before March 24, 1971, were granted refugee status and eventually citizenship, while those arriving after this date are largely considered illegal migrants, with exceptions made for those fleeing persecution, particularly religious minorities. In recent years, however, there has been an uptick in the number of border crossings by Bangladeshi migrants, predominantly from the Bengali-speaking Muslim majority.

Economic conditions in Bangladesh have been a key driver of migration. With approximately 80 percent of Bangladesh’s population living in rural areas and 53 percent classified as poor by the World Bank, the country faces a diminishing land base, with cultivated land decreasing at a rate of 1 percent annually. As a result, many Bangladeshis seek better opportunities across the border in India, particularly in the NER (Manoharan, 2012).

In Assam, especially in regions bordering Bangladesh, migrant settlers have become the dominant demographic, which has significantly reduced the local tribal populations to minority status. For example, in Dhubri, an area that lies along the Indo-Bangladesh border and serves as an entry point for migrants, the proportion of Bengali-speaking Muslims increased from 70.45 percent in 1991 to 76 percent by the 2011 Census, while the growth of indigenous Assamese-speaking Muslims remained minimal (Chowdhury, 2014).

From 1951 to 2001, Assam experienced a population increase of 136.38 percent, which surpassed the national growth rate of 116.30 percent. The decade from 1951 to 1961 saw a population rise of 34.98 percent in Assam, compared to a national increase of 21.64 percent. From 1971 to 1991, the growth rate surged to 47.60 percent, with a projected 24.24 percent increase during the 1981-1991 period (as no census was conducted in Assam in 1981). The 1961 census recorded that approximately 750,000 East Pakistanis had migrated to Assam during the 1951-1961 period (Singh, 2009).

In response to these demographic shifts, widespread discontent among the Assamese population led to the formation of the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) in 1978. AASU initiated a campaign to identify illegal immigrants, remove them from electoral rolls, and push for their deportation. However, the large and unregulated immigrant demographic made it difficult to quantify the extent of illegal migration. The 2011 provisional census data indicates that Assam’s population has surpassed 31 million, covering an area of 78,438 sq. km (48,739 square miles). Several uprisings have occurred in Assam against Bangladeshi immigrants, underscoring the challenges posed by the lack of reliable data. The census relies on self-reported information, which does not capture undocumented migrants, resulting in gaps in official records (Das, 2008).

West Bengal, which shares the longest border with Bangladesh, experiences the highest number of immigrants among the northeastern states. Over the past two decades, it has consistently ranked first in immigrant reception due to its favourable conditions for newcomers (Pramanik, 2005:10-12). Despite this significant influx, the West Bengal Government has not implemented substantial measures to address immigration issues. The historical context of Bangladeshi immigration highlights a deep-rooted connection, as the Bengal region has long been characterised by shared ethnic, linguistic, and religious traits. This cultural affinity facilitates the integration of immigrants into Indian society, particularly in

West Bengal and Tripura, where communities closely resemble the population of Bangladesh (Kibria, 2011; Jopesh & Narendran, 2013).

The trend of immigration remains relatively consistent across other northeastern states, but West Bengal exhibits a notably high and variable influx. According to the World Bank report of 2011, approximately 3.3 million migrants traverse the Bangladesh-India corridor. Other estimates suggest an annual influx of around 300,000 individuals, equating to about 1,000 new arrivals each day (Ghosh, 2003). Additionally, the National Sample Survey's 55th round, conducted between July 1999 and June 2000, estimated the Bangladeshi immigrant population at 960,000 (NSSO, 2001).

In West Bengal, Bangladeshi immigration has surged over the past fifty years, now exceeding 80%. The cultural and linguistic similarities between the two regions have been key factors in attracting Bangladeshi immigrants (Pramanik, 2005:17-19). Other states, such as Assam, West Bengal, and Tripura, have reached saturation points, facing challenges like limited agricultural land and a scarcity of low-skilled job opportunities due to the lack of major industries. As a result, many Bangladeshi immigrants have migrated to urban centers in Western, Northern, and Southern India, including Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Chennai (Pramanik, 2005; Nanda, 2005; Das, 2016). In the last decade, immigration patterns in Assam and Tripura have remained relatively stable, while West Bengal's immigrant percentages have fluctuated, showing figures of 55% in 1971, 89% in 1981, 80% in 1991, 88% in 2001, and 81% in 2011.

Tripura has also experienced significant immigration, particularly from Hindu refugees and illegal migrants. Despite the state's general compassion in accommodating immigrants, there have been violent confrontations between the indigenous population and newcomers. The adoption of Bengali as the official language and Hinduism as the royal faith facilitated the integration of Bengali cultural influences among the local rulers and their subjects, making assimilation relatively smooth. Unlike Assam, the Bengali immigrant community in Tripura has played a vital role in the state's economic and cultural development (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2014). Although Bangladeshi immigration peaked until 1991, the trend has since declined. A recent incident in August 2024, where 12–15 Bangladeshi nationals attempted to cross into Tripura near BOP Pahamura in Khowai District, was thwarted by the Border Security Force (BSF), which fired warning shots, forcing them to retreat to Bangladesh.

Nagaland also saw significant population growth, with its population increasing from 56.08% during the 1981-1991 decade to 64.41% in 1991-2001. The districts of Dimapur and Wokha, which border Assam, experienced particularly high growth rates. Notably, Wokha district recorded a remarkable 95.01% increase between 1991 and 2001, the highest for any district nationwide. This growth can largely be attributed to the ongoing and unregulated influx of illegal immigrants (Singh, 2009). This unregulated migration has had a profound impact on the state's socio-political landscape.

In Mizoram, migration from Bangladesh and Myanmar has become a serious concern, with an estimated 10,000 immigrants entering the state, primarily as manual labourers. These individuals often cross the borders from Bangladesh or Myanmar, and sometimes through the neighbouring districts of Cachar and Karimganj in Assam (The Telegraph, 2008). Following a crackdown by Bangladeshi security forces on militants, hundreds of refugees sought refuge in Mizoram, with reports of about 270 individuals, including women and children, crossing into the state at Lawngtlai, located near the tri-junction of India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh (Bhattacharyya, 2022). In the latest crossing, Mizoram received at least 127 Bangladeshi nationals of Kuki-Chin descent fleeing military actions in the Chittagong Hills Tracts, where the Kuki-Chin National Army, an insurgent group, is active (The Wire, 2024).

Meghalaya, which shares a 443-kilometres border with Bangladesh, has also emerged as a significant destination for Bangladeshi nationals. Reports have also indicated the presence of Bangladeshi immigrants in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. In February 2004, authorities arrested 20 Bangladeshi nationals in Imphal for lacking proper documentation to enter Manipur (North East Tribune, 2004). One detainee, involved in the scrap collection industry, had been residing in the Lilong Uku Mamang area since 2014 with expired passport and visa documents (PTI, 2021). In light of increasing border security concerns, the central government has urged states like Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh to expedite the construction of fencing along the India-Myanmar border. The communication emphasised the urgency of completing the 243-kilometres section in Manipur and the 480-kilometres unfenced area in Arunachal Pradesh (Tanupriya, 2024).

The lack of fencing along the Brahmaputra River in Assam further facilitates the illegal entry of immigrants. Census data, which relies on self-reported information, often fails to accurately reflect the true extent of migration, as evidenced by the unrest in Assam (Nanda, 2005:3-6). As a result of immigration control measures in the 1990s, states like Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram have become alternative destinations for immigrants seeking economic opportunities. Many migrants have established residency and obtained documentation to assert their citizenship (Ramachandran, 2005:5-7). Consequently, migration from Bangladesh has significantly influenced population growth in Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal, posing ongoing challenges for these regions.

Table. 1 Show the Density of Population of the North-East India (2011 Census)

State	Area (Sq. Km)	Population	Density (Per Sq. Km)
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743	13,83,727	17
Assam	78,438	3,12,05,576	398
Manipur	22,327	28,55,794	115
Meghalaya	22,429	29,66,889	132
Mizoram	22,081	10,97,206	52
Nagaland	16,579	19,78,502	119
Sikkim	7,096	6,10,577	86
Tripura	10,486	36,73,917	350
Total NE	2,62,179	4,57,72,188	173
All India	32,87,263	1,21,08,54,977	382

Source: Census of India 2011.

IMPACT OF MIGRATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Migration, particularly from Bangladesh, has significantly reshaped the demographic, social, economic, and political landscape of India’s northeastern states. The consequences of this phenomenon are far-reaching, contributing to tensions between indigenous communities and Bangladeshi Muslim settlers (Goswami, 2018). These undocumented migrants have increasingly encroached on agricultural, grazing, and forest lands traditionally utilised by native groups like the Bodos in Assam, fueling conflicts and anxiety among tribal populations. Compounding the issue are criminal activities such as drug trafficking, which often exploit the porous Indo-Bangladesh border. The Supreme Court of India has described the situation in Assam as one of “external aggression and internal disturbance,” underscoring the severity of these challenges. While initiatives like the 2011 Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) aim to mitigate the issue, gaps in border fencing and unresolved boundary disputes leave the region vulnerable to further migration and related complications.

1. Demographic Impact: The demographic impact of unchecked illegal immigration in North-East India remains a contentious and critical issue, raising significant concerns about its implications. While

evidence supports claims of this impact, ambiguity persists due to many immigrants identifying solely as ‘Bengali speakers,’ complicating efforts to distinguish between indigenous Muslims and those who migrated after 1971. Furthermore, many immigrants identify primarily as ‘Bengali speakers,’ complicating the process of differentiation. Analysing population growth trends in Assam and Nagaland reveals significant increases linked to illegal immigration. Among the states in North-East India, Assam has been most affected, historically serving as a destination for migrants due to its persistent labour shortages and abundant resources, particularly fertile land. While precise figures on illegal migration are lacking, estimates suggest that approximately 6 million of the 26 million residents in Assam are undocumented Bangladeshi migrants (Goswami, 2010).

In Tripura, migration has altered the state’s demographic profile. The influx of non-tribal populations began in the early 20th century, with substantial numbers of Muslim and Hindu Bengali migrants arriving in the princely state, thereby challenging the tribal population’s numerical superiority. Additionally, during the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of Chakmas and Hajongs migrated to Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram due to the Kaptai hydroelectric dam’s construction and ethnic conflicts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Currently, illegal migration continues to surge across various states in Northeast India, as evidenced by population statistics. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh’s population rose from 864,558 in 1991 to 1,382,611 in 2011 (Academia.edu), while Manipur’s increased from 1,837,000 to 2,721,000 in the same period. Meghalaya’s population grew from 1,774,778 to 2,964,007, and Mizoram experienced a 29.18% increase. Nagaland’s population growth is particularly striking, escalating from 1,209,546 to 1,980,602. These figures clearly show the demographic dominance of Bangladeshi migrants in various northeast states (Sharma & Bhushan, 2014).

2. Cultural Identity and Ethnic Conflicts: The long-term impact of migration in North-East India has created serious challenges for indigenous communities, who feel alienated from their own land due to large-scale immigration. This issue is viewed as a direct threat to their cultural identity, prompting the rise of extremist groups and various movements aimed at preserving and protecting indigenous cultural heritage. Notable examples include the Assam Movement and the Bodoland Movement in Assam, as well as tribal movements in Tripura. The primary objective of the Assam Movement was to “detect, deport, and delete” foreign nationals from the electoral roll of Assam, a position that gained widespread support (Baruah, 1986). Similarly, the core aims of the tribal movements in Tripura were centered around safeguarding indigenous identity and political rights. These movements were partly fueled by the growing perception that the influx of non-indigenous migrants would overwhelm local populations and disrupt their social fabric (https://www.facebook.com/p/A-Great-History-of-Boro-Kachary-100066511486769/?locale=ru_RU).

3. Ethnic Conflicts and Issues of Human Rights Violations: Ethnic conflicts in North-East India, often spurred by migration and land disputes, have led to significant human rights violations over time. The Assam Movement (1979–1985) witnessed at least 471 bomb blast incidents, resulting in the deaths of 101 individuals. A particularly tragic event occurred on February 18, 1983, when over 1,200 people, predominantly women and children, were killed in Nellie, Nagaon district (Hazarika, 1993). The Bodoland Movement (1987–1993) claimed the lives of at least 1,135 Bodo individuals and displaced over 150,000 people, forcing them into relief camps lacking adequate government support for relief, rehabilitation, and medical care. A report by the All Bodo Students’ Union to then Prime Minister V.P. Singh indicated that more than 200 Bodo inmates died from starvation, with an additional 93 succumbing to inadequate medical care in Gohpur, Assam (Bodoland Watch, 2015). Similarly, in Tripura, ethnic violence resulted in 1,300 fatalities, the destruction of 34,661 homes, and the displacement of 189,919 individuals, with the violence being so severe that even children were not spared (Facebook, 2021).

These conflicts in the region are primarily rooted in issues of land and identity, rather than religious differences. For instance, the latest outbreak of violence between the Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims in July 2012 within the BTAD districts of Kokhrajjar, Chirang, and Dhubri resulted in 77 deaths and displaced over 400,000 people from both communities. During these riots, there were extensive protests throughout North-East India advocating for the “early detection and deportation” of undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2012).

4. Socio-Economic Impact: The influx of Bangladeshi Muslim peasants has had significant adverse effects on the rural economy of Assam and other northeastern states (Khataniar, 2014). Driven by population pressures and severe food shortages, these migrants sought refuge in Assam, resulting in substantial land settlement. According to the Land Revenue Report, between 1930 and 1940, approximately 6,162 thousand acres were allocated to Bangladeshi immigrants, with this figure rising to nearly 8,926 thousand acres by the 1951 Census. The organized occupation of wastelands, particularly grazing and forest areas, by these immigrants has had far-reaching socio-economic consequences. The influx has resulted in an oversupply of labour in agriculture, exacerbating unemployment and contributing to rural poverty. Furthermore, the last two decades of the 20th century saw a surge in regionalism and mass movements against illegal migration, which, due to the government’s lack of responsiveness, often escalated into violence, leading to significant loss of life and property.

5. Threat to Internal Security: The influx of Bangladeshi Muslims has posed a threat to internal security in Assam, leading to various political and security challenges within the state. There is a notable correlation between illegal immigration and regional unrest, as evidenced by the rise of insurgency in both Assam and Tripura. Certain insurgent factions have leveraged the immigration issue to bolster their positions. In Tripura, for instance, the influx of migrants has marginalised the indigenous population, leading to the emergence of insurgent groups like the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) (Manoharan, 2012). Similarly, the migration issue has raised concerns about security in Arunachal Pradesh, with reports of Bangladeshi migrants infiltrating even distant areas of the state, further exacerbating security threats in the region.

Additionally, the substantial presence of foreign nationals has fostered a susceptible demographic that can be exploited by anti-India external entities. Consequently, immigration carries both direct and indirect implications for the security of the region. The potential loss of Assam would isolate the entire North-East region from the rest of India, resulting in a significant depletion of the nation’s rich natural resources. This concern extends to other northeastern states, particularly those bordering Bangladesh, such as Tripura and Meghalaya (Beyond Borders, 2021).

The Supreme Court of India, in its 2005 judgment, observed that “the presence of such a large number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, which runs into millions, is an ‘aggression’ on the State of Assam and has also contributed significantly in causing serious ‘internal disturbances’ in the shape of insurgency of alarming proportion” (Kapur, 2023). The 4,096 km India-Bangladesh border is densely populated, complicating monitoring efforts; while fencing has been implemented, only 2,760.12 km have been completed. Assam, Tripura, North Bengal, and Meghalaya remain particularly vulnerable to the security challenges posed by illegal immigration.

6. Political Impact: Since the 1970s, illegal immigration has become a highly politicised issue in Assam, with various political formations adopting different stances to gain electoral advantage. This has intensified in recent decades, contributing to the issue’s complex political landscape. Between 1994 and 1997, 57 out of the 126 Assembly constituencies in Assam witnessed voter increases exceeding 20%, a sharp contrast to the national average of 7.4% (Gokhale, 2001). This significant rise in voter numbers has fueled concerns about the potential manipulation of electoral rolls to include individuals of

questionable nationality. A notable example is the case of Mohammad Kamaluddin, a Bangladeshi national who illegally entered India and attempted to contest the Jamunamukh Assembly seat in 1996, though he later withdrew his candidacy for unspecified reasons. Kamaluddin was arrested in August 2008 and deported following a ruling by the Gauhati High Court.

The political ramifications of illegal immigration have also contributed to the formation of the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), which emerged after the Supreme Court's July 2005 judgment striking down the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act (IMDT Act). The AUDF opposes what it perceives as “minority appeasement” or “vote-bank politics” promoted by the BJP and AGP, instead advocating for the political empowerment of minority Muslims. Following the signing of the Assam Accord, two political parties came to the forefront: the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), formed by student leaders from the Assam Movement, and the United Minorities Front (UMF), created by prominent East Bengali Hindu and Muslim politicians previously affiliated with the Congress (I). While the AGP focused on implementing the Assam Accord, the UMF called for its repeal (Baruah, 1986).

NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS (NRC)

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a register meant to list all the legitimate citizens of India. Its creation and maintenance were mandated by the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003. This Act amended the Citizenship Act, 1955, and introduced several significant provisions: defining the term “illegal migrant,” who could face detention or deportation; making illegal immigrants ineligible for citizenship by registration or naturalization; and disallowing citizenship by birth for children born in India if either parent is an illegal immigrant. Additionally, it introduced the concept of the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) for citizens of Indian origin from other countries. The Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2003 and received presidential approval in January 2004.

The NRC was first created by the Government of Assam after the 1951 Census of India. However, it was not updated until a major drive took place between 2013 and 2019. Assam, a border state, has long struggled with the issue of illegal immigration, particularly from Bangladesh. The original NRC was based on data from the 1951 Census, but it was not maintained or updated in subsequent decades. In 1983, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act was passed by Parliament, establishing a tribunal process for identifying illegal migrants in Assam. However, this Act was struck down by the Supreme Court of India in 2005 following the case of Sarbananda Sonowal vs. Union of India (Mathur, 2005), which declared it unconstitutional. Sonowal’s petition argued that the provisions of the Act were in violation of the Indian Constitution and that the Foreigners Act, 1946, and its rules should apply to Assam.

In response to this judgment, the Government of India agreed to update the Assam NRC. Due to unsatisfactory progress in the NRC update process over the years, the Supreme Court took over the supervision in 2013. The final updated list was released on August 31, 2019, which included 3.1 crore names out of a total population of 3.3 crore. As a result, approximately 1.9 million people were excluded and rendered stateless (Adnan, 2020). This marked the largest effort to ascertain the citizenship status of people residing in India, particularly targeting illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who entered the country after March 25, 1971.

The influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh into Assam has been a source of contention and protest among the local population, especially the youth. These protests were driven by concerns over the increase in the number of voters on electoral rolls, especially in lower and central Assam, which fueled suspicions that illegal migrants were being included. This unrest grew into a large-scale movement known as the Assam Agitation (or Assam Movement), which was led by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). This movement lasted

for six years and ultimately led to the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985. While the Assam Accord ended the agitation, it failed to provide a lasting solution to the issue of illegal immigration.

The Assam Accord set forth specific provisions regarding the citizenship of migrants in Assam. Those who migrated to Assam between 1951 and 1961 were granted full citizenship rights, including the right to vote. Those who arrived between 1961 and 1971 were granted citizenship but with a 10-year restriction on voting rights. Migrants who entered Assam after 1971 were to be subject to deportation (Journal of India, 2021).

The release of the final NRC list on August 31, 2019, sparked widespread controversy. Several lawmakers, including an MLA from Assam representing the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), criticised the list for excluding many legitimate Indian citizens while including undocumented immigrants (Pal, 2023). This exclusion led to protests, which were further inflamed by the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019. The CAA grants citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Buddhists, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who entered India before 2014 due to religious persecution. However, the Act specifically excludes Muslims and other communities from these countries, leading to further divisions and protests, especially in Assam.

CHALLENGES IN PREVENTING ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

In recent times, several studies have been conducted on the implications of illegal immigration, revealing that public discourse may have significantly overstated the issue. In North-East India, there is a prevailing concern that, similar to the political and demographic marginalisation experienced by the tribes of Tripura, other states could face a similar fate without proactive interventions. In response, the Government of India has implemented various measures, including the construction of border fencing and roads, as well as efforts to identify, detect, and deport illegal immigrants, aiming to curb cross-border migration into the North-Eastern Region. However, these initiatives encounter numerous challenges, which have hindered their effectiveness in preventing such migration (Singh, 2009).

1. Demographic Profile: The Indo-Bangladesh border is the longest international boundary that India shares with any nation. The demographic profile of the populations on either side of this border is intertwined through historical connections and shared ethnic and kinship affinities. Consequently, the political division established post-partition is often regarded as ‘irrelevant by the borderland people’. This perspective fosters a belief among them that “crossing the border is their birth right” (Ibid), complicating the process of distinguishing between Indian citizens and foreign nationals.

2. Indifferent Stance of Bangladesh: As a nascent nation, Bangladesh has struggled with its economic challenges, leading to a situation where poverty-stricken citizens began migrating to India. Officially, Bangladesh denied these migrations and opposed India’s efforts to deport individuals found crossing the border. Diplomatic discussions on this matter were virtually nonexistent, as India leveled accusations that Bangladesh consistently denied (Banjan, 2015). The issues of cross-border migration and the presence of Indian insurgents within Bangladesh remain pivotal in the bilateral relationship. Bangladesh has persistently rejected claims regarding its citizens in India or the existence of Indian insurgents on its territory. In January 1999, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed asserted that “There are no Bangladeshi infiltrators in India. Why should a Bangladeshi national cross over and relocate to a foreign country?” (Chanda, 1999). For instance, during the 1992-93 period, Indian authorities conducted ‘Operation Pushback,’ which involved the detention and repatriation of suspected Bangladeshis, a move that Bangladesh vehemently opposed, labeling those individuals as ‘Indian citizens.’ The “Operation Pushback” was branded as “Operation Push-In” by them. This official denial has had significant

repercussions for individual migrants, as the Bangladeshi Government refused to acknowledge them while Indian political factions exploited the situation to create a vote bank in their favour.

3. Communal Politics: The issue of illegal immigration in India is increasingly intertwined with communal tensions. Campaigns initiated by local vigilante groups in states such as Assam and Nagaland have intensified distrust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The minority Muslim population often perceives these initiatives as a form of betrayal (Singh & Suman, 2016), while some segments of society criticise the Muslim community for allegedly being lenient towards immigration issues.

4. Corruption: Corruption within local administration significantly impedes efforts to combat illegal immigration. In border areas, human smuggling is prevalent, with intermediaries facilitating unlawful crossings. Many individuals suspected of being illegal immigrants possess official documents such as ration cards, driving licenses, and voter identity cards, which can erroneously classify them as Indian citizens. Local residents often contribute to this issue by providing these identity documents to migrants seeking safe passage. Moreover, border security personnel frequently struggle to differentiate between local Indians and Bangladeshi migrants due to language barriers (Banjan, 2015). A report highlighted irregularities in the issuance of birth certificates by the Guwahati Municipal Corporation for a paltry sum of Rs. 200, prompting Nagaland's Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio to express concerns about the detrimental impact of such corruption on North-East India (Dholabhai, 2003). The prevalence of corruption in the area and crossing the border for a few hundred rupees exchanged with the forces is a common feature (Ibid), including among Border Security Force (BSF) personnel, exacerbates immigration challenges, particularly in areas where nearly 40% of the Indo-Bangladesh border is riparian and difficult to patrol or fence easily.

5. Lack of Permanent Boundary Pillars and Fencing in Borders: The presence of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India, resulting from border crossings, poses a challenge to the nation's sovereignty. In response to the persistent challenge of unauthorised crossings, which the Bangladeshi government has refused to acknowledge, India has implemented measures since the 1980s. Efforts to secure the 4,095.7 km international border with Bangladesh have included the initiation of fencing projects, which began in 1986. To date, approximately 2,677.81 km of the planned 3,436.59 km have been completed, with states such as West Bengal (2,216.7 km), Assam (663 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Tripura (856 km), and Mizoram (318 km) sharing the border. Additionally, border observation posts (BOPs) have been established at intervals of three to four kilometres. However, certain areas remain undemarcated (6.1 km in three spots); others exist as enclaves in the other country's territory (111 Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves inside India) and as adverse possession of land by both countries (Prakash & Menon, 2011), complicating effective border management. Consequently, the lack of permanent structures not only hinders patrolling efforts but also facilitates illegal crossings (Dutta, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Government measures such as the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, and the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000, exist to regulate and address immigration challenges; however, the geographical features of India significantly influence the patterns of Bangladeshi migration. Assam's riverine borders, for example, limit movement primarily to the dry season, while Meghalaya's plateau offers more accessible routes for immigrants. Conversely, Mizoram's hilly landscape, though presenting some challenges, is less of a barrier due to the establishment of border roads. Tripura's flat terrain provides an easier entry point for migrants, and West Bengal's deltaic and mangrove ecosystems, particularly in the Sundarbans, also facilitate crossings, all of which are monitored through integrated check posts.

Migration, particularly in border states like Assam, is intrinsically linked to the socio-economic and cultural identities of the communities involved. The influx of both skilled and unskilled migrants' places substantial pressure on the region's resources, land, and infrastructure, resulting in concerns like land alienation that threaten the cultural and economic stability of indigenous populations. Over time, such pressures have led to the emergence of various community movements aimed at addressing these challenges, often resulting in considerable human suffering and social unrest.

Therefore, addressing migration is not only a matter of national security but also crucial for ensuring a peaceful and sustainable future for the region. To achieve this, a multi-pronged approach is required. First, the timely completion of the fencing along the India-Bangladesh border will help enhance security and reassure indigenous residents. Second, the issuance of voter identity cards to all eligible citizens would help mitigate the influence of vote bank politics, ensuring a more transparent and fair electoral process. Third, effective collaboration between law enforcement and administrative bodies is essential to establish a temporary work permit system for immigrants. While such permits would not directly benefit those already residing in India illegally, they would help regulate and manage future migration, providing a framework for legal employment and integration.

In addition, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive white paper on illegal immigration, which would outline the scope of the issue and propose actionable solutions. A committee of experts, led by the Union Home Ministry, could be tasked with developing this document to inform policy decisions and strategies. Lastly, promoting research on immigration, including both academic and policy-oriented studies, is critical for a nuanced understanding of the issue. Sub-regional organisations like BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) can also play an instrumental role in addressing the challenges posed by illegal immigration between member countries, fostering collaboration and facilitating the development of joint initiatives.

Thus, while immigration remains a complex and multifaceted issue, coordinated efforts at the national, regional, and local levels, supported by robust policy frameworks and research, are essential for managing migration effectively and ensuring the stability and security of the affected regions.

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