

Illegal Migration in Assam: National Security Issues and Challenges in India

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Abstract: Assam, a state in Northeast India, has a long history of grappling with illegal migration, primarily from Bangladesh. This involves individuals entering or staying in the country without the required legal documentation or overstaying their visas. This influx has led to a complex web of conflicts and issues, impacting the state's demographics, economy, society, and security. This article examines the historical context of illegal migration in Assam, and analyses the socio-political, economic and cultural consequences, and explores the security challenges it poses. Further, it discusses the legal and administrative measures taken to address the issue and evaluates their effectiveness. Finally, it offers recommendations for a comprehensive approach to managing migration and mitigating its negative impacts in the country.

Keywords: Illegal Migrant, Border Fencing, Conflicts, Socio-Economics, Legal

Introduction; Assam, a state in northeastern India, has been grappling with the issue of illegal migration for decades. Assam has a 263-kilometer border with Bangladesh, of which 143.9 kilometers are land and 119.1 kilometers are riverine. The state's proximity to Bangladesh and its porous border have made it a prime

destination for migrants seeking economic opportunities or fleeing socio-political unrest in their country (Das, 2008). This influx of illegal migrants has had a profound impact on the state, leading to a complex web of conflicts and issues that have strained its resources, altered its demographic landscape, and posed significant security challenges.

The main roots of this issue might be traced back to the pre-independence era, when the discovery of tea in Assam led to an influx of economic migrants from Bengal, both during the British rule and in the post-independence period (Kotwal, 2001). These migrants were often exploited by political leaders as a means of retaining power (Kotwal, 2001). The continued flow of illegal migrants from Bangladesh has exacerbated the demographic imbalance in Assam, contributing to a rise in the crime rate and aggravating the security threat to the region (Plabita, 2015).

The grave matter of illegal migration has become a contentious political issue, with different political parties using the migrants as a vote bank and hindering the deportation process. The lack of a strong political will and effective legal mechanisms has made it difficult to address the problem effectively. The demographic shifts caused by the influx of illegal migrants have also been a significant factor in the rise of insurgency in Assam, as the indigenous Assamese population attempts to protect their cultural identity and economic interests (Kotwal, 2001).

The then Union Minister of State (Home), Sri Prakash Jaiswal expressed in Parliament in 2024 that around 12053950 illegal Bangladeshi migrants settled in the state of Assam (Kotch, 2015). Again in 2015, the then Assam's Governor Ajai Singh shared a report to the MHA that approximately 6000 Bangladeshis enter in the state everyday (Katoch, 2015). Indeed, the influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh has a profound impact on the socio-economic and political landscape

of Assam. The state's fragile ethnic balance has been further strained, leading to tensions and conflicts between the indigenous population and the immigrant communities. This research paper aims to delve into the various aspects of illegal migration in Assam, including its historical context, the socio-political, economic and cultural consequences, and the security challenges it poses. It will also explore the legal and administrative measures taken by the state and centre governments to address the issues and assess their effectiveness.

Causes of Infiltration of Illegal Migration in India

Illegal migration is a complex and multifaceted issue that has become a significant concern for India, a country grappling with the challenges of maintaining its borders and managing the influx of people seeking opportunities or shelter within its boundaries (Kumar, 2010). Illegal migration, the entry or stay of individuals in a country without the necessary legal documentation, is a complex issue with various contributing factors (Kumar, 2010). In India, this phenomenon is influenced by a confluence of socio-economic, political, and geographical elements, both within the country and in its neighboring regions. The multifaceted causes of illegal migration in India, exploring the interplay of these factors are discussed in below.

Economic Disparities: One of the most significant drivers of illegal migration to India is the stark economic disparity between India and its neighbours, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar (Mayilvaganan, 2019). These countries often face higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited economic opportunities. The lure of better wages, employment prospects, and a higher standard of living in India acts as a powerful “pull factor,” drawing people seeking economic betterment. This economic disparity is further exacerbated by natural disasters and climate change, which can displace populations and disrupt livelihoods, pushing people to seek refuge and opportunities elsewhere.

Political Instability: Political Instabilities in our neighboring countries also contribute significantly to illegal migration into India (Das, 2016). Refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence, discrimination, or political persecution often cross borders irregularly in search of safety and security. The protracted Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, for instance, has led to a large influx of refugees into India, many of whom lack proper documentation and are considered illegal immigrants. Similarly, political unrest and ethnic conflicts in other neighboring countries can displace populations and drive them to seek refuge in India.

Porous Borders and Weak Border Management: India's extensive and often porous borders with its neighbours pose a significant challenge in controlling illegal migration (Das, 2008). The long and difficult-to-patrol borders, particularly with Bangladesh and Nepal, facilitate illegal crossings. Inadequate infrastructure, limited manpower, and corruption within border security forces further exacerbate the problem. The lack of effective border management mechanisms, including surveillance technology and biometric identification systems, makes it challenging to monitor and control cross-border movement effectively.

Human Trafficking and Smuggling Networks: Organized criminal networks engaged in human trafficking and smuggling exploit vulnerable individuals and facilitate their illegal entry into India. These networks often prey on people seeking better economic opportunities or fleeing desperate situations, promising them jobs and a better life. However, these individuals often end up in exploitative situations, subjected to forced labor, sexual exploitation, or other forms of abuse. The profits generated by these criminal networks perpetuate the cycle of illegal migration and pose a serious threat to human security.

Internal Factors: While external factors play a significant role, internal factors within India also contribute to illegal migration. The demand for cheap labour in certain areas like construction, and domestic work, creates a pull factor for

undocumented migrants. Employers often prefer hiring illegal migrants as they can be exploited and paid lower wages without providing benefits or adhering to labor laws. This demand for cheap labor perpetuates the influx of illegal migrants and undermines efforts to regulate the labor market.

Lack of Comprehensive Migration Policy: India somewhat lacks a comprehensive and coherent migration policy that addresses the multifaceted challenges of illegal migration. The existing legal framework is often fragmented and inadequate, lacking clear guidelines for managing migration flows, processing asylum claims, and addressing the needs of migrants. The absence of a comprehensive policy framework hinders effective management of migration and creates loopholes that can be exploited by illegal migrants and criminal networks.

Addressing the complex issue of illegal migration in India requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles both the push and pull factors. This includes strengthening border security, improving border management mechanisms, addressing the root causes of migration in source countries, combating human trafficking networks, and developing a comprehensive migration policy framework. International cooperation and regional partnerships are also crucial for addressing this trans-national challenge effectively.

Historical Context of Illegal Migration in Assam

Assam's history of migration is a complex tapestry woven from various threads of social, economic, and political factors. While migration to the region has occurred for centuries, the threats of illegal migration, particularly from Bangladesh, has become a significant point of contention in recent times. Unfolding this historical context is important for grasping the intricacies and challenges of these grave issues and formulating fruitful solutions.

Pre-Colonial Period: Even before the British arrived, Assam experienced migrations from various groups, including those from present-day Myanmar, Tibet,

and other parts of India. These migrations often involved the assimilation of different cultures and ethnicities into Assamese society.

British Colonial Period: The British annexation of Assam in 1826 marked a turning point in the region's migration history. The British, seeking to maximize revenue from the fertile lands of Assam, actively encouraged migration from other parts of India, particularly Bengal, to work on tea plantations and other agricultural projects (Suykens & Vandekerckhove, 2008). This period saw a substantial influx of laborers, many of whom settled permanently in Assam, altering the demographic composition of the region. This policy of encouraging migration, while driven by economic interests, inadvertently sowed the seeds of future ethnic tensions.

Post-Independence and Partition: The 1947 partition of India and the subsequent formation of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) further complicated the migration dynamics in Assam. The partition led to mass displacement and migration across the newly formed borders, with many refugees from East Pakistan seeking refuge in Assam. This influx of refugees, coupled with continued migration driven by economic factors, significantly altered the demographic landscape of Assam, leading to concerns among the indigenous population about their cultural identity and political representation (Kotwal, 2001).

The far-Reaching Consequences of Illegal Migration in Assam:

Illegal migration has profoundly impacted Assam, a state in Northeast India, leaving an indelible mark on its socio-economic and political landscape. The influx of migrants, primarily from neighboring Bangladesh, has created a complex web of issues, straining resources, altering demographics, and fueling social tensions. It will delve into the multifaceted consequences of illegal migration in Assam, exploring its impact on various aspects of the state's fabric.

Socio-Economic Impacts: The influx of illegal migrants has placed a significant strain on Assam's resources and infrastructure. Competition for limited resources,

such as land, water, and employment opportunities, has intensified, leading to economic hardship for the indigenous population (Das, 2016). Increased population density has put a strain on resources such as land, water, and employment opportunities, exacerbating competition and tensions between local communities and migrants (Sarmah & Sonowal, 2006). The informal economy has expanded, often exploiting cheap migrant labor, which can depress wages and working conditions for all. Furthermore, the increased demand for public services, such as healthcare and education, has stretched the state's capacity, impacting the quality and accessibility of these services for everyone.

The demographic changes resulting from illegal migration have also raised concerns about the preservation of Assamese culture and identity (Das, 2016). The influx of migrants has altered the ethnic composition of the state, leading to fears of cultural dilution and marginalization of indigenous communities. Language, traditions, and social structures have been impacted, creating anxieties about the future of Assamese identity.

Political Impacts: Illegal migration has become a highly politicized issue in Assam, influencing electoral outcomes and shaping political discourse (Mahapatra, 2012). The issue has been exploited by various political parties for electoral gains, often exacerbating social divisions and fueling ethnic tensions. The demand for stricter immigration policies and the protection of indigenous rights has become a rallying cry for various political groups, influencing the state's political landscape. The presence of a large undocumented population also poses challenges for governance and law enforcement. It can create difficulties in implementing development programs, maintaining law and order, and ensuring effective delivery of public services. The lack of accurate data on the migrant population hinders planning and resource allocation, making it challenging to address the specific needs of both the indigenous population and the migrants.

Environmental Impacts: The increasing population density due to illegal migration has also put a strain on Assam's environment. Deforestation, land degradation, and pollution have been exacerbated by the growing demand for resources and infrastructure. The fragile ecosystem of the region is facing increasing pressure, impacting biodiversity and the livelihoods of communities dependent on natural resources.

Cross-Border Insurgency: The long porous border between India and Bangladesh has been exploited by different anti-national groups operating mainly in the Northeast. Illegal migration facilitates the infiltration of these groups, allowing them to establish bases, recruit new members, and smuggle arms and ammunition (Das, 2008). This not only fuels insurgency but also creates a climate of fear and instability in the region. The presence of these groups disrupts normal life, hinders development, and poses a direct threat to national security.

Ethnic Conflicts: Illegal migration can exacerbate existing ethnic tensions and lead to violent clashes between different groups. Competition for scarce resources, such as land and employment opportunities, can fuel resentment and animosity between the local population and migrants (Kotwal, 2001). This can escalate into violent conflicts, disrupting peace and stability in the region. The influx of migrants can also lead to changes in the demographic balance, further fueling anxieties and tensions.

Rise in Criminal Activities: Illegal migration has been linked to a rise in various criminal activities in the region. Human trafficking, drug smuggling, and extortion are some of the illicit activities that often accompany illegal migration. These criminal networks exploit vulnerable migrants and contribute to the overall deterioration of law and order. The profits from these illegal activities can also be used to fund insurgent groups, creating a vicious cycle of violence and instability.

The security challenges posed by illegal migration in Assam and the Northeast have implications for national security. The region's strategic location, bordering several countries, makes it vulnerable to external threats. The presence of insurgent groups, coupled with the rise in criminal activities, can destabilize the entire region and pose a threat to India's territorial integrity. The porous border with Bangladesh and the presence of a large undocumented population create vulnerabilities that can be exploited by criminal elements and insurgent groups (Plabita, 2015). The influx of migrants has sometimes been linked to an increase in crime rates and social unrest, further exacerbating security challenges.

Legal and Administrative Measures on Illegal Migration in Assam, India.

The concerns and issues of the illegal migration in Assam, India, have been a long-standing concern with significant social, political, and economic ramifications. Over the years, various legal and administrative measures have been implemented to address this complex issue. This portion will examine these measures, analyzing their effectiveness and the challenges they face.

The Assam Accord: The Assam Agitation, a six-year-long popular movement, highlighted the issue of the illegal migrants from mainly Bangladesh and its different forms of impact on the state. The agitation demanded the detection and deportation of these people. The movement brought the issue to national attention and resulted the signing of Assam Accord in 1985 between Indian government and the leaders of the Assam Agitation. This agreement aimed to identify and deport illegal migrants who entered the state after 25 March 1971 (the date when Bangladesh declared independence). The Accord was a significant step towards addressing the issue, but its implementation has been fraught with challenges and controversies (Boruah, 2021).

National Register of Citizens: It is a register which contains names of the citizens of India. The NRC update in Assam state, initiated in 2013, aimed to identify and

exclude illegal migrants by verifying citizenship documents. The process was complex and resource-intensive, involving extensive documentation and verification procedures. While the NRC update was intended to provide a definitive solution, it faced numerous legal challenges and logistical hurdles.

Citizenship Act: The CAA, 2019 offers a path to Indian citizenship for religious minorities (excluding Muslims) who fled from different forms of persecution from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan and came in India before 31 December 2014. This act has been highly controversial, with critics arguing that it violates the secular principles of the Indian Constitution and discriminates against Muslim migrants (Boruah, 2021). The CAA's implications for Assam and the NRC process have been a subject of intense debate.

Border Fencing and Security Measures: Recognising the long porous condition of the India-Bangladesh border, the Indian government has undertaken various measures to strengthen border security. These include the construction of a fence along the border and the deployment of additional border security forces to enhance surveillance and patrolling (Das, 2008). However, the long and challenging terrain of the border makes complete sealing a difficult task.

Deportation and Repatriation: Deportation of identified illegal migrants has been a key component of the government's strategy. However, the process of deportation is often complex and faces various legal and logistical challenges. Bilateral agreements with Bangladesh are crucial for effective repatriation of illegal migrants.

Effectiveness and Challenges

While these legal and administrative measures have had some success in addressing the issue of illegal migration, they have also faced significant challenges:

- **Implementation Issues:** The effective implementation of Assam Accord and the updated NRC one have been plagued by delays, logistical complexities, and legal controversies.
- **Porous Border:** Despite fencing efforts, the long and porous border remains difficult to completely secure, allowing for continued illegal crossings.
- **Lack of Political will:** The politization of these issues have often hampered effective implementation of policies.
- **Humanitarian Concerns:** Deportation and detention of illegal migrants raise humanitarian concerns, particularly regarding the rights of vulnerable groups.

A Comprehensive Approach to Illegal Migration in Assam

Illegal migration in Assam, India, presents a complex challenge with far-reaching consequences. A multitude of factors contribute to this issue, including socio-economic disparities, political instability, and the porous border with Bangladesh. Addressing this multifaceted problem requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond mere border security measures and delves into the root causes of migration. A holistic and multi-pronged strategies that addressed the root causes of the illegal migration, promote sustainable development, and foster social harmony are essential for mitigating the negative consequences of illegal migration and building a more inclusive and prosperous future for Assam.

Strengthening Border Management: While not a standalone solution, robust border management is a crucial component of any comprehensive approach. This involves not only physical infrastructure like fences and barriers but also technological enhancements such as surveillance systems and biometric identification (The Hindi, 2021). Increased deployment of border security personnel, coupled with improved training and equipment, can enhance patrolling and detection capabilities. However, the focus should be on smart border management, utilizing technology and intelligence to effectively monitor and control cross-border movement.

Streamlining Legal Processes: A clear and efficient legal framework is essential for identifying, processing, and (where applicable) deporting illegal migrants. This includes strengthening existing mechanisms like the Foreigners Tribunals and ensuring due process and human rights are upheld throughout the process (Saha, 2021). Simplifying the legal procedures can help expedite the resolution of cases and reduce the backlog. Furthermore, addressing legal loopholes and ambiguities can prevent exploitation and manipulation of the system.

Addressing Socio-Economic Concerns: A significant driver of migration is the pursuit of better economic opportunities and living conditions. Addressing the socio-economic disparities that fuel migration is crucial for a long-term solution. This involves implementing development programs in both Assam and neighboring countries like Bangladesh to create employment opportunities, improve access to education and healthcare, and reduce poverty (Sarmah & Sonowal, 2006). Investing in human capital and infrastructure can create a more conducive environment in source countries, reducing the incentive for migration.

Promoting Dialogue and Cooperation: International cooperation is essential for addressing cross-border migration. Engaging in bilateral discussions with Bangladesh to establish joint mechanisms for border management, information sharing, and repatriation of illegal migrants is crucial (Das, 2008). Collaborative efforts can also focus on addressing the root causes of migration through joint development initiatives and sharing best practices. Regional cooperation with other neighboring countries can further enhance efforts to combat human trafficking and other related criminal activities.

Fostering Social Harmony: The influx of migrants can sometimes exacerbate existing social tensions and lead to conflict. Promoting inter-community dialogue, understanding, and peaceful coexistence is vital for maintaining social harmony (Plabita, 2015). This involves fostering cultural exchange programs, promoting

inclusive development initiatives, and addressing grievances through peaceful means. Building trust and understanding between different communities can help mitigate potential conflicts and create a more inclusive society.

Empowering Local Communities: Local communities are at the forefront of experiencing the impacts of illegal migration. Involving them in the decision-making process and empowering them to participate in solutions is crucial. This can include supporting community-based initiatives, providing access to information and resources, and incorporating local knowledge and perspectives into policy formulation. Empowered communities can play a vital role in monitoring and reporting illegal activities, promoting social integration, and fostering peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

Addressing the complex issue of illegal migration in Assam requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach that goes beyond simplistic solutions. By strengthening border management, streamlining legal processes, addressing socio-economic concerns, promoting dialogue and cooperation, fostering social harmony, and empowering local communities, a more effective and sustainable solution can be achieved. Finding a sustainable and humane solution that respects the rights of all stakeholders remains a priority for the government and the people of Assam. This requires a long-term commitment from all stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organisations to work together towards a common goal.

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