

Politics of Illegal Migration and Its Impact on Socio-Economic and Politics of Assam

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Abstract

Migration and illegal migration, a global phenomenon often associated with economic opportunity or forced displacement. Assam bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Nagaland and Manipur to the east, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, and Bangladesh to the south, and West Bengal to the west, its geographical contiguity with a long 262 km almost open border with Bangladesh has historically made it a gateway for cross-border movements. Assam, a strategically vital state in India's northeastern part, has been historically shaped by waves of migration and illegal migration, mainly illegal migration changed the demographic, socio-economic, and political fabric, igniting decades of unrest and a persistent struggle for indigenous people's identity of Assam. During British colonial rule, the British administration encouraged the migration of Bengali Muslim peasants into Assam's fertile river valleys, especially the Brahmaputra Valley, to develop agriculture, this move aided economic development and it also laid the foundation for demographic changes that would later fuel ethnic anxieties. The 1947 Partition of India changed Assam's demography as Hindu refugees from East Pakistan crossed into the state. In 1971, the major influx happened at the time of Bangladesh Liberation War, when millions of Bengali Muslims and Hindus sought refuge in India specially in Assam but many of these refugees remained in Assam. Each wave reshaped population patterns, triggering political upheavals and ongoing friction over citizenship and rights but most importantly illegal immigration from East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh, has profoundly reshaped the state. Due to the undocumented huge influx from Bangladesh create concerns the indigenous communities of Assam have about been numerically, economically, and culturally marginalized in their own homeland and raised voices and protest against that influx. The issue was not just merely one of numbers but of identity, resource allocation, and political power.

Keywords: Illegal Migration, Indigenous people, Boundary, Politics, Socio-economy.

Introduction

History of Migration to Assam

Assam became part of British administration in 1826 according to the Yanda bo treaty after that British colonial administration, seeking to maximize revenue from agricultural expansion especially tea cultivation and resource exploitation, actively encouraged migration into Assam. They brought in indentured labourers from various parts of India primarily from Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Bengal to work in tea gardens and administration. Simultaneously, the "Line System" policy facilitated the settlement

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of landless Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal into the fertile Brahmaputra Valley, primarily for agricultural purposes. This policy was aimed at increasing agricultural output and revenue, but it inadvertently laid the groundwork for future demographic shifts and ethnic tensions in Assam. Interestingly by 1891, a significant portion of Assam's population was already of migrant origin.

The Partition of India in 1947, which carved East Pakistan now Bangladesh out of Bengal, dramatically altered the nature of migration. The newly drawn international border made previous cross-border movements now termed as "illegal." However, religious persecution, economic distress, and political instability in East Pakistan led to a massive exodus of refugees, both Hindu and Muslim, into the state.

The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 triggered an even larger wave of migration in India but mainly affected to the state of Assam. While many were repatriated after Bangladesh gained independence but a significant number of populations, particularly non-Muslims fearing persecution in the newly formed Muslim-majority nation, chose to remain in India and majority of them settling in Assam. This period is considered a very crucial turning point, intensifying the demographic pressures and fuelling the fears of indigenous Assamese communities about their numerical survival and identity.

Illegal Immigration in Assam: Politics, Economy, and Society

The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War brought millions of refugees into Assam and many of them never returned but this illegal immigration changed Assam's demographic landscape and future. Politically, migration shapes constituencies and rouses identity-based mobilisation. The census report from 1991–2011 shows that Muslim population in Assam's rising abnormally from 28% to 34%, while districts like Dhubri, Barpeta, and Karimganj nearing or crossing almost 50%. An increasing population due to illegal immigration places a tremendous burden on land encroachment, pressure on agriculture, public infrastructure and services are visible. Hospitals, schools, sanitation systems, and housing facilities in many districts of Assam are overstretched. The state's ability to provide basic amenities is strained, especially in areas where illegal settlements are dense, affecting both migrants and native residents alike.

Political Dimensions of Illegal Immigration

The core of the political discourse revolves around the threat to Assamese identity, language, and culture due to the abnormal demographic changes caused by illegal immigration from outside. This fear of being reduced to a minority in their own homeland, similar to what happened in neighbouring state of Tripura, has fuelled widespread agitation in Assam. Due to the changing demographic profile led to the famous Assam

Agitation from 1979 to 1985, a six-year mass movement led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), demanding the identification and deportation of illegal immigrants mainly who are coming from Bangladesh. The movement was characterized by civil disobedience, political instability, and ethnic violence in Assam. The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, signed between AASU and the Government of India and according to the Accord established March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for detecting and deporting illegal migrants, essentially recognizing those who came before this date as citizens. However, the implementation of Accord has been fraught with many challenges and has remained a politically charged issue in present Assam also. The significant political impact is the alleged use of illegal migrants as "vote banks" by various political parties for their political benefit. This has made the issue of deportation politically sensitive and difficult to address effectively, as parties are often accused of prioritizing electoral gains over the concerns of the indigenous population. The foreigner issue also has frequently led to communal and ethnic violence in between indigenous Assamese communities and migrant groups, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims, as competition for resources and political influence intensifies.

To tackle the illegal immigration issue India, have laws like the Foreigners Act, 1946, and the Citizenship Act, 1955, and later the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 (which was later struck down by the Supreme Court). The National Register of Citizens (NRC) update process in Assam was another attempt to identify and document genuine Indian citizens, but it also faced immense complexities and criticism. The National Register of Citizens (NRC), originally compiled in 1951, was updated in 2019 to identify illegal immigrants residing in Assam. Around 1.9 million people were excluded from the final NRC list published by the government but there was sparking controversies over the fairness, transparency, and issue of human rights. Foreigners' Tribunals were set up to hear the appeals of those left out, but many of them face legal challenges due to lack of proper documentation, poverty, or illiteracy. The NRC became a divisive issue, drawing support from those who saw it as a step toward protecting indigenous rights and opposition from those who saw it as a discriminatory policy, especially targeting the Bengali Muslim community. The Indian government in 2019 it passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which offers a path to citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who entered India before December 31, 2014 but in Assam, many people and organization protests against this act, they thought that the Act would legitimize illegal immigrants and undermine the Assam Accord and this has led to renewed protests and deepened the sense of betrayal among indigenous Assamese communities, who argue that it further threatens their demographic and cultural integrity by shifting the burden of migration solely onto Assam.

The uncontrolled influx is also raised question about national security and integrity, with the concerns about potential external influence and the demographic alteration of a strategically important border state. Due to the possible infiltration of anti-national elements, drug traffickers, or extremist groups under the guise of immigration. Immigration factors contributing to the rise of various insurgent groups in Assam, particularly those rooted in ethnic identity politics. The perceived threat to indigenous communities' existence has fuelled narratives of marginalization, which some militant groups have exploited, while evidence remains limited, the potential risks prompt heavy militarization and increased vigilance along the border areas, sometimes leading to civilian hardships and human rights violations. The state machinery often struggles to implement deportation or border control policies effectively. Diplomatic relations with Bangladesh, where many of the immigrants originate, complicate repatriation efforts. Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency also hinder identification and tracking of illegal immigrants.

The issue of illegal migration has created unwanted tense in between the centre-state relations. Assam has always wanted greater central assistance to handled border management, detection and deportation but sometimes the policy of the central government's has been perceived as insensitive to Assam's unique demographic anxieties. The implementation of the Assam Accord, the NRC, and the CAA all these highlight the complexities and tensions inherent in managing this foreigner's issue at both state and national levels.

Economic Dimensions of Illegal Immigration

Assam is primarily an agrarian state where maximum population are related with the agricultural field and the area was also had significant forest cover. Migrants, often landless in their original homes, exert immense pressure on land, forests, and other natural resources. The increased population density in Assam due to illegal migration has put immense pressure on land, leading to land alienation from indigenous communities. Encroachment on forest lands, wetlands, and common property resources has been a recurring issue, often escalating into disputes and conflicts. This pressure also extends to water resources and other environmental assets. This has led to deforestation, encroachment on government and tribal lands, land which are occupied by indigenous people by generation to generation and environmental degradation.

With increasing population density due to immigration, land in Assam has become a scarce and contested resource. Illegal settlers often encroach on government land, forests, and tribal belts, leading to frequent clashes with indigenous communities. Encroachment also affects agricultural productivity, causes deforestation, and contributes

to environmental degradation, particularly in bank of the river like Brahmaputra, Barak River etc. and ecologically sensitive regions like National parks specially in the Kaziranga National Park. Illegal settlements in forest areas and tribal belts reduced agricultural output and triggered ecological conflicts.

The illegal migrants primarily fill jobs that native Assamese, especially the educated youth, are less willing to do, there are also concerns about undercutting of wages for unskilled jobs and a perceived loss of employment opportunities for locals and interestingly many illegal immigrants are willing to work for lower wages, with any conditions thereby it pushing out local workers and depressing wage rates. Indigenous labourers of Assam, especially those who are engaging in agriculture, small businesses and construction are face stiff competition, resulting in increased unemployment and underemployment among the native population. One important thing is that the illegal immigrants often operate outside from the formal economy, which makes hard to authority to regulate or tax. Immigrants often evade taxation yet consume public goods like housing, health, education etc. causing burden for the state treasure. It was seen that government are also spending lot of funds to provide relief during the time of flood and subsidized food in immigrant-heavy regions. This reduces state revenue and makes it harder to implement other development activities in the state. Labour laws or minimum wages laws, or social security schemes of the government are couldn't implemented properly due to that. This also contributes to a large, unregulated informal economy that offers no legal protections for workers and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

The influx of a large, often low-skilled, labour force has been argued to depress wages for unskilled labour in certain sectors, creating economic competition with the indigenous population. While some argue that migrants fill labour gaps in sectors like agriculture, trade, domestic level and construction sectors, others contend that they displace indigenous workers and contribute to unemployment among local indigenous youth. The prevalence of informal economy activities among migrant populations further complicates formal economic planning and resource distribution. This creates a shadow economy that is difficult to regulate or tax, potentially impacting the state's revenue collection. While remittances sent by migrants can contribute to the economy of their home countries, their direct positive impact on Assam's economy is a subject of debate, often overshadowed by concerns of resource drain.

Social Dimensions of Illegal Immigration:

Migration has significantly altered Assam's demography, leading to concerns about the indigenous Assamese people becoming a minority in their own land. The continuous influx of Bengali-speaking migrants, particularly Muslims, has led to significant demographic changes in several districts of Assam, districts like Dhubri, Goalpara,

Barpeta, Nagaon, Morigaon show exceptionally high growth rates and on other hand the indigenous Assamese and Tribal communities are becoming minorities. This fuels fears of cultural erosion and loss of linguistic and unique ethnic identity. Demographic changes due to illegal migration led to tensions between Assamese people and other indigenous communities. Competition over land, jobs, and political representation often turns violent, as seen in the 1983 and Clashes between Bodos and Bengali Muslims in 2012. Such type of clashes and incidents create communal distrust and polarize society. Socially, the influx has led to ghettos and informal settlements, creating pockets of poverty and exclusion. A rapidly growing population, regardless of its origin, places a substantial burden on public infrastructure and services. Education, healthcare, sanitation, and housing facilities in Assam, already facing developmental challenges, have been strained by the increased demand from both indigenous and migrant populations, leading to perceived inadequacy and inequities in access.

Indigenous Assamese people have been the perceived threat to their linguistic and cultural identity. The fear is that the Assamese language, which has historically been a unifying force, could be diluted or even superseded by Bengali, given the linguistic background of a significant number of migrants. Traditional Assamese cultural practices, literature, and art forms are also seen by some as being under threat from the cultural influences of migrant populations. The very definition of "Assamese" has become contested. Is it purely linguistic, ethnic, or a composite identity that can assimilate new groups? The continuous influx of people with distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds challenges the existing notions of Assamese identity, leading to introspection, redefinition, and sometimes, exclusion. The debate over who constitutes an "indigenous Assamese" is central to the politics of citizenship and rights in the state.

Undocumented migration poses a threat to the identity of Assamese people, affecting social, economic, and political environments. It creates law and order problems and contributes to economic insecurity for indigenous populations due to competition for resources, land and employment, particularly in the informal sector.

Policy Responses

Assam has witnessed a series of policy responses aimed at addressing illegal migration, ranging from legislative measures to administrative actions. However, these policies have often faced significant implementation challenges and have been met with varying degrees of success and controversy. Illegal immigration in Assam remains one of the most challenging socio-political issues facing India today. While concerns about demographic changes, cultural identity, and resource strain are legitimate, responses must be balanced, humane, and constitutional. Politicizing immigration risks tearing the

social fabric of Assam, while inaction perpetuates economic and ethnic tensions. We need a holistic approach which balancing security, human rights, economic development, and community cohesion and it is the need of the hour. Only through informed policy-making, judicial oversight, and inclusive dialogue can we hope to resolve the immigration conundrum that has long haunted its people and politics. Here there are some policy responses we discussed.

We all know that India shares a 4,096-kilometer porous border with Bangladesh, a significant portion of Assam's 262 km Bangladesh border, around 171 km is fenced which is in Assam, due to improper border fencing in between Bangladesh and India make it easy for the infiltrators to enter Assam. While complete sealing of the border may be impractical in spite of that fencing of large parts of the border in Assam has been undertaken but yet riverine borders remain vulnerable. Despite efforts to fence the border, deploy security forces, and patrol riverine areas, complete sealing remains a formidable challenge due to difficult terrain, rivers, and the prevalence of human trafficking networks. Smuggling and illegal cross-border movements continue to occur, highlighting the limitations of physical barriers alone. We need technological surveillance, improved physical barriers in vulnerable stretches, more stringent patrolling and increased BSF deployment have improved monitoring to curb future influx.

India has several laws to regulate the entry, stay, and exit of foreigners, including the Foreigners Act, 1946, and the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920. The Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, empowers the central government to expel persons whose stay is detrimental to public interest. Recently, the Assam government has indicated its intent to revive the 1950 Act for direct pushbacks, bypassing Foreigners Tribunals in certain cases. Assam govt. recently takes steps to pushback illegal infiltrators to their homeland. However, effective implementation of these laws has been hampered by various factors, including political will, bureaucratic inertia, and legal complexities and others.

The detection and deportation of illegal migrants have proven to be the most intractable problems. Foreigners Tribunals, set up to adjudicate citizenship, have been criticized for their slow pace, inconsistent rulings, and the lack of proper legal aid for those facing scrutiny. The process of identifying and proving foreign nationality is inherently complex, often relying on old and sometimes unreliable documentation. More significantly, Bangladesh has consistently refused to acknowledge or accept individuals identified as its citizens by India, making deportation virtually impossible in most cases. This lack of a repatriation agreement with Bangladesh is a major bottleneck.

A pragmatic and sustained diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh are essential to address the root causes of migration and to explore mechanisms for repatriation, however challenging that may be. The deported inflaters if not accepted by the Bangladesh authority, then it creates the situation not good for us. Without Bangladesh's cooperation, the issue of deportation remains a perpetual deadlock.

Different student bodies like AASU and various civil society organizations can also play a crucial role in these regards. Implementation of the provision of Assam Accord is very important to settle the issues of illegal immigration in Assam. Political will is very important to minimise the issue of illegal immigration. Efforts from all sides can only saves Assam and its uniqueness. Any policy must balance enforcement with empathy, and sovereignty with individual rights. Only through transparent tribunals, equitable laws, robust legal aid, and community dialogue can Assam find a path that respects both its identity and its humanity.

Conclusion

Assam's immigration issue is multifaceted historical, political, economic, and social steeped in culture and security. illegal migration mainly from Bangladesh in Assam is not merely a demographic issue but a deeply entrenched political problem with far-reaching socio-economic consequences. It has shaped political movements, electoral outcomes, inter-community relations, and the overall development trajectory of the state, making it one of the most critical and enduring challenges not only specifically Assam but for India also. the politics of illegal migration in Assam is not just a regional challenge; it is a profound test of India's constitutional values, its commitment to human rights, and its ability to manage complex demographic shifts in a globalized world. It is a narrative of demographic shifts, economic anxieties, cultural threats, and a relentless struggle for identity and political control. The impact on Assam's socio-economic landscape is evident in the increased pressure on land and resources, competition for employment, and strain on public services. Socially, the fear of cultural erosion and the periodic eruption of ethnic and communal tensions have fractured society, leading to a contested sense of Assamese identity. Politically, the issue remains a central determinant of electoral outcomes, party alignments, and the relationship between the state and the central government. Looking ahead to resolved the decade long issues of illegal immigration in this region required a prolonged positive attitude and willingness from every one including government, civil society and different organization of the states. The Assam Movement, the Assam Accord, the NRC, and the CAA represent significant attempts to address this complex problem, yet none have provided a definitive solution. Instead, each intervention has brought its own set of challenges, controversies, and renewed tensions, leaving the state in a perpetual state of influx. it was not easy to solved the issues easily yes there are

difficulties, but a sincere, humane, and determined effort is required to move beyond the decades of agitation and towards a more stable, equitable, prosperous and harmonious future for Assam. It was the demand of the time and if we are failed to respond it then it was very difficult for the indigenous people of Assam to survive in their own land. The state's unique history and geopolitical position demand a comprehensive strategy that transcends mere rhetoric and addresses sensitively the deeply rooted anxieties of the people of Assam.

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