

Socio-Economic and Political Consequence of Illegal Migration into Assam from Bangladesh

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Abstract

Illegal migration into Assam from Bangladesh has been posing a serious security threat to the identity of Assamese people. It adversely affects the social, economic and political environment of Assam, creating law and order problems where immigrants are present in large number. The flow of immigrants started during the rule of British and continued till today due to the pull and push factors. The deportation of illegal migrants become difficult due to the lack of strong law and political will, as illegal migrants are used as a vote bank by different political parties. The data provided in the study indicates that if necessary steps are not taken immediately, Assam, the elder sister of North-East India would lose its identity from the map of India very soon. The illegal migration is one of the major reasons for social and ethnic violence in Assam. Therefore it is high time that India takes stringent measures against the illegal migrants who have become a real threat to the security of the country. To meet the problem, a few suggestions are forwarded in this paper.

Keywords: Illegal migration; Immigrants; Security threat; Assam; Bangladesh; Demography

Introduction

The unrelenting influx of illegal migrants from East Pakistan/Bangladesh into Assam and the consequent perceptible change in the demographic pattern of the State has been a matter of grave concern. It poses a serious threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security. It threatens to reduce the Assamese people to a minority in their own State, as happened in Tripura and Sikkim. Migration from Bangladesh to the Northeast region of India has been continuous throughout the twentieth century due to the reason of historical links, geographical and physical proximity. The better employment opportunities and availability of fertile agricultural land in Assam act as a pull factor while the poverty, subsistence living, ravages caused by floods and other natural calamities in Bangladesh act as push factors (Figure 1) [1].

Post independent period during 1951-2011 the population growth of the state of Assam was 288.21% against 235.15% for all India [2]. This high growth rate of population apparently suggests large scale migration to the state Assam.

Illegal migration has generated a host of destabilizing political, social, economic, ethnic and communal tensions. Politically, the Bangladeshi migrants are in a position to influence the results of the elections in a large number of constituencies in the North East (about 32% of the constituencies in Assam). Economically, increased pressure on land, resulting in depletion of forest wealth, undercutting of wages of unskilled jobs, forcible occupation of Government land by the migrants and a host of other such issues, generate a ripple effect in the entire North East [3].

There is a tendency to view illegal migration into Assam as a regional matter, affecting only the people of Assam. Its more dangerous dimension of greatly undermining our national security is ignored. The long cherished design of Greater East Pakistan/Bangladesh, making inroads into the strategic land link of Assam with the rest of the country, can lead to severing the entire land mass of the North East, with all its rich resources, from the rest of the country. This will have disastrous strategic and economic consequences [4].

Conceptual Framework

Migration is not a new phenomenon in this world. "From the antiquity, people are found to move from one place to another, sometimes in search of better opportunities, when they see some of their needs and desires are not adequately fulfilled in their present location, sometimes just to maintain the status quo when they see their present situation seems to be a declining one". The study of migration is one of the major branches of demography. It is the third demographic component of population change along with fertility and mortality. Migration can change the size of the population and also the other compositions like age, sex, language, religion etc. It brings both quantitative and qualitative changes in the socio-economic and political pattern of a region.

Types of migration

In general the field of migration study can be divided into two parts - internal migration and international migration. Internal migration is when people migrate within the same country or region, also known as 'in-migrant'. While the international migration is when people migrate from one country to another country, also termed as 'immigrant'.

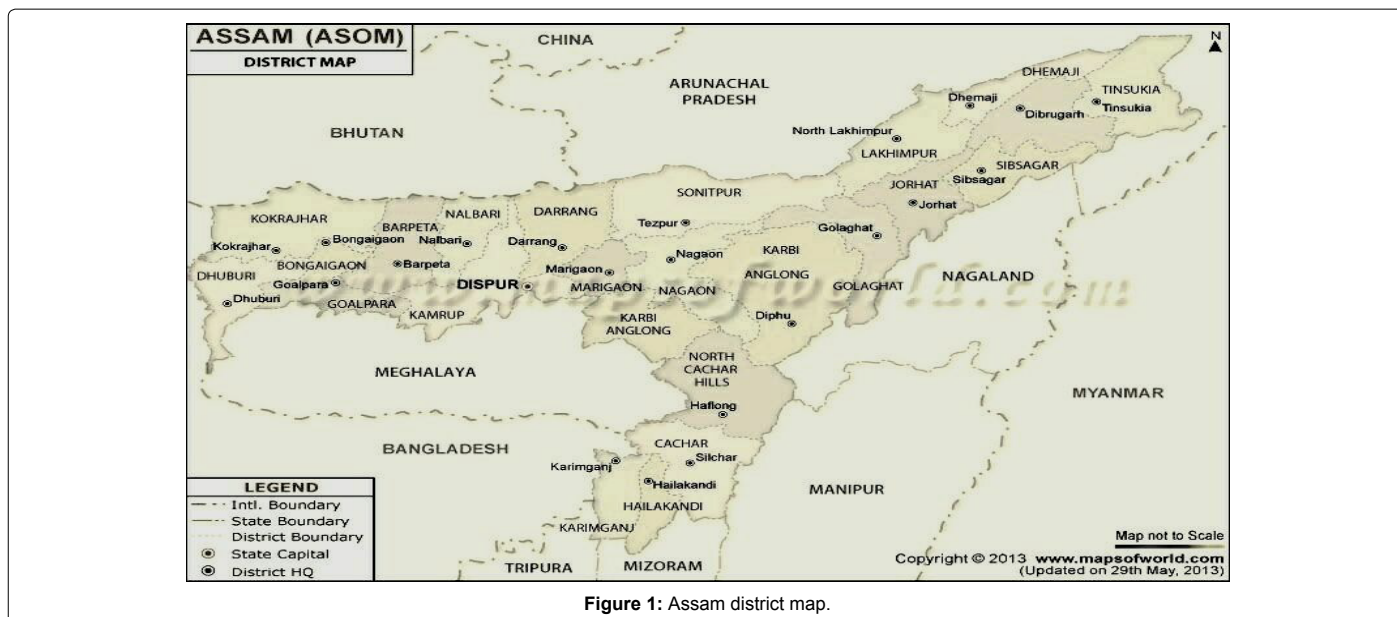
The area from which a migrant departs is termed as 'area of origin' and the area at which he arrives is termed as 'area of destination'. When a large number of migrants depart from a common area of origin and arrive at a common area of destination during a particular period of time, is known as 'migration stream' (Figure 2).

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Who are the illegal migrants?

Unlike a refugee, an illegal migrant is a person who crosses an international boundary and without any valid document, enters into another country for the purpose of carrying on any illegal or anti-social activities in that country or for other economic or political purposes. According to Section 2(b) of The Citizenship Act, 1955, an “illegal migrant” means a foreigner who has entered into India:

- (i) Without a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf; or
- (ii) with a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf but remains therein beyond the permitted period of time.

Illegal migrants have been defined in Assam Accord as those who infiltrated illegally after 24 December 1971. However, the stream that

infiltrated illegally between 1st January 1966 and 24 December 1971 was not to be deported and was to be given Indian citizenship after a lapse of ten years.

Historical background of migration

The British developed the tea industry in Assam. The Assamese people living mostly in Upper Assam and cultivating one crop per year were not interested in working as labor in the tea gardens. Therefore, the British encouraged Bengali Muslim peasants from present Bangladesh to move into Lower Assam for putting virgin land under cultivation. This set in motion a movement pattern which despite changed conditions, has been continuing to this day.

After the partition of Bengal in 1905, the over-populated Muslim peasantry from East Bengal started crossing over to the fertile lands of thinly populated Brahmaputra and Surma valleys in the Northeast corner of India. The formation of the All India Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906 encouraged the migration to increase the Muslim population in

Assam for political reasons. The arrival of immigrants continued even after the creation of Bangladesh due to ethnic persecution of minorities.

Literature Review

There is no dearth of books, articles and research paper regarding the issue of illegal migration and its consequence. Sanjib Baruah emphasizes how tea began to play a crucial role in Assam to attract migrants from different parts [5]. Hazarika focuses on the rise of insurgency and violence in Assam and North -East states due to immigration [6].

There are a number of studies that focus on the socio-ethnic, political, and economic issues related to migration comprehensively analyzed the social and political conflicts and cleavages that have resulted from the responses of the indigenous population to migration into Assam.

Chirantan Kumar established the link between migration and refugee. He also analyzed the factors which responsible for the large scale migration from Bangladesh to India and its impact on the demography [7].

Namrata Goswami argues that the presence of a large number of illegal immigrants potentially enables external actors like Pakistan and China to influence events in the Northeast [8]. The evidence of militant groups from Assam and other northeastern states being sheltered in Bangladesh and being aided by Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) only aggravates this fear. Uddipana Goswami reflects on the so-called "lebensraum" theory that sees the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants as a part of a conspiracy to make Assam a part of greater Bangladesh [9].

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the present paper is to highlight the following issues:

- i. To examine the factors of illegal migration from Bangladesh to Assam [10-12].
- ii. To analyze the socio -economic and political consequences of illegal migration [13].
- iii. To propose some suggestions to control the flow of illegal migration.

Methodology

The paper explains both with quantitative and qualitative natures. It is based on the secondary data derived from books, journals, articles, websites and government sources. Observational method is also used for analyzing the data.

Result and Discussion

Contributory factors of illegal migration

- i. Increasing pressure on land and mounting unemployment in Bangladesh due to uncontrolled steep rise in population and high density of population (964 per sq. km, according to 2011 estimate).
- ii. The large scale migration from Bangladesh to India has been possible mainly due to the porous India-Bangladesh border of 4,096 kilometers, the fencing of which has not been completed so far.

iii. Better economic opportunities across the border.

iv. Competitive politics of vote-bank and the patronage extended to them by political parties/vested political groups in India.

v. Presence of strong pro-Bangladesh lobby in India often creates myths and confuses Indians about the gravity of the problem.

vi. Large segments of population in Bangladesh uprooted severe floods and cyclones.

Magnitude of migration

After independence of India, the affect of migration to Assam was the highest. Illegal migration from Bangladesh is largely responsible for the demographic transformation of Assam. The claim of massive and continuing migration can be proved through the high decadal population growth rate of Assam since 1901 (Table 1).

If we compare the decadal growth rate of population in Assam with that of India, the figures would look almost conclusive that such influx of illegal migration must have continued throughout the history of Assam.

At present out of total 27 districts of Assam, the districts that have been facing mostly the crucial problem of illegal migration are -Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Dhemaji, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi (Table 2).

The trends of population density in Assam since 1901 are one of the major indications to explain how illegal migration may create serious problem for indigenous people. Increasing the density level means more problems of health, sanitation and housing (Table 3). Again according to the 2011 census data Assam recorded the highest increase in share of Muslim from 30.9% (2001) of the state's population to 34.2% (2011) [2].

Social consequences of illegal migration

Crisis of identity: The influx of immigrants created a crisis of identity among the indigenous Assamese. Their cultural survival will be in jeopardy, their political control will be weakened and their employment opportunities will be undermined by such illegal migration. Assamese found that though the immigrants had settled in Assam, most of them failed to identify themselves with the mainstream. The recent Bodo-Muslim violence in the BTAD has its root on the issue of illegal migration.

Environmental degradation: Large areas of forest land were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation. The state experienced declining percent of land area under forest from 39% in 1951-52 to about 30% now.

Difficult to identify the illegal migrants: Due to the similar language spoken by illegal migrants from Bangladesh and the indigenous Bengali speaking Muslim of Assam, it becomes difficult to identify and deport the illegal migration from Assam soil.

Community tension: The commission on integration and Cohesion found that tension usually exist with the presence of high levels of migration combine with other forms of social exclusion like poverty, poor housing etc.

Economic consequences

Increase financial burden: Immigration has increased pressure on the part of state government, as the government has to increase the expenditure on education and health facilities to the immigrants.

Period	Assam (in %)	India in (%)
1901-11	+11.0	+5.8
1911-21	+20.5	-0.3
1921-31	+19.9	+11.0
1931-41	+20.4	+14.2
1941-51	+19.9	+13.3
1951-61	+35.0	+21.6
1961-71	+35.0	+24.8
1971-81	+23.3	+24.7
1981-91	+23.6	+23.5
1991-01	+18.8	+21.3
2001-11	+16.93	+17.6

Source: CMIF, basic statistics relating to Indian Economy.

Table 1: Decadal population growth rate of Assam.

Districts	Decadal Growth rate in 2001(in %)	Decadal growth rate in 2011(in %)
Dhubri	22.97	24.40
Goalpara	23.03	22.74
Barpeta	19.62	21.40
Morigaon	21.35	23.39
Nagaon	22.26	22.09
Dhemaji	19.45	20.30
Cachar	18.89	20.17
Karimganj	21.87	20.74
Hailakandi	20.89	21.44

Source: Census data Assam [2].

Table 2: Decadal growth rate of nine districts of Assam.

Year	Population in lakh	Density per sq. km.
1901	33	74
1951	80	176
1971	146	186
2001	266	340
2011	311	398

Source: CMIF basic statistics relating to Indian economy.

Table 3: Demographic profile of Assam.

Displacing native workers: There is a fear particularly during a recession that immigrants take jobs which would otherwise be taken by local people; in particular place and circumstances there can be competition and conflict.

Decreases wage level with the increase of population: Illegal immigrants in every year have been adding a good number of people in Assam. It is one of the main reasons of population explosion. Due to this there is a possibility of decreasing wage level.

Political consequences

Assam agitation: The failure of government to respond the issue of illegal migration led to the agitation by the Assamese under the leadership of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and All Assam Student's Union (AASU). Assam witnessed governmental instability, sustained civil disobedience campaigns and worst cases of ethnic violence. Assam accord was the result of this agitation.

Illegal voters: Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants have got their names enlisted in the voting list illegally, thereby claiming themselves as citizens of the state. The immigrant's population act as a vote bank for the political parties in Assam. The recent initiative NRC (National Register of Citizens) is meant for the detection of illegal Bangladeshi

migrants. However success of such initiative will depend on the strong political will.

Issue of terrorism: Pakistan's ISI has been active in Bangladesh supporting militant movements in Assam (Lt Gen S K Sinha, 1998). It is alleged that among the illegal migrants there are also militants, who enter into Assam to carry out the terrorist activities.

Some Recommendations to Meet the Problem

- i. The Central Government should appoint a National Immigration Commission to frame a National Migration Policy and a National Refugee Policy. The Commission should examine ways of strengthening the Foreigners Act 1946, as well as feasibility of Identity Cards for both citizens and non-citizens and Work Permits for migrants.
- ii. Border fencing in Assam must be completed forthwith on a war footing. The existing Border Security Force posts and the BSF water wing should be strengthened.
- iii. Our nationals in the border districts and for that matter in the whole State should be provided multipurpose photo identity card.
- iv. The ongoing NRC updating should be completed without delay and proper arrangement for the deportation of illegal migrants should be done.
- v. The Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983 should be repealed.

Conclusion

A Problem which has its historical roots so deep cannot be solved overnight. The dangerous consequences of large scale illegal migration from Bangladesh, both for the people of Assam and more for the Nation as a whole, need to be emphatically stressed. No misconceived and mistaken notions of secularism should be allowed to come in the way of doing so. Illegal migration from Bangladesh is no longer a regional problem which can be pushed under the carpet. These migrants are now spread in several states and distant places such as Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and so on.

This silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in the loss of the geo strategically vital districts of Lower Assam. The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made. Thus it is high time to solve the problems of illegal migration to save Assamese people in their own land and to save the nation from the threat of immigrants.

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