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ISSN: 2278-9529



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## Illegal Migration into Assam from Bangladesh: Causes and Consequences

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### Introduction

North Eastern region of India shares a long international boundary with its neighbouring states of Bangladesh, China, Myanmar and Bhutan. India has a total 4097 km border with Bangladesh along West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. Out of this, Assam shares 262 km international border with Bangladesh. Due to lack of adequate and efficient border protection system at place, and due to several push-pull factors this region is facing a serious problem of illegal migration from Bangladesh. This phenomenon has created a situation of vulnerability to the socio-economic life and, political and demographic structure of Assam.

An attempt is made in this paper to examine and analyse the impact of illegal migration from Bangladesh into Assam. When migration is characterized by movement of population to other countries with people and culture of their own, then it raises issues regarding identity, loyalty, development and security. The study finds that immigrants have put a tremendous pressure on land and created socio-political and environmental problems that have indirect adverse affect on the economy. The issue of identity is another major consequence of the illegal migration from Bangladesh.

### Objective

1. To examine the causes and consequences of illegal migration into Assam from Bangladesh.
2. To study the nature and extent of illegal migration into Assam.

### Methodology

For the present study data were collected merely from the secondary sources viz. several census reports of India during 1971-2001, books, journals, magazines, internet etc. The collected data were analyzed by employing the analytical method of research.

## The Nature and Extent of the Problem of Illegal Migration

The issue of illegal migration is a matter of major concern and debate in recent times. Bangladeshi migrants to Assam consists of Muslim migrants and Hindu refugees. Both categories have different sets of reasons to migrate.

There is insufficient record of the exact number of migrants from Bangladesh. But it is a fact that Bangladeshi migrants have sizeable presence in Assam. Estimates show that out of 26 million populations in Assam almost 6 million are illegal Bangladeshi migrants. (Goswami, 2006). Another estimate by a former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal holds that about 5 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh are settled in Assam (Rajeswar, 1996).

Historically present Bangladesh was a part of India and was called East Bengal till the time of independence of India in 1947. After independence and partition of India, the Muslim majority areas of East Bengal formed a part of Pakistan and came to be known as East Pakistan. Facing the problem of being left out due to the long distance from the centre of administration in West Pakistan (Present Pakistan) a wave of nationalism arose in East Pakistan and in 1971 finally saw the emergence of the present state of Bangladesh after a freedom struggle against the West Pakistan government.

There was a flow of migration from this area since India was a British colony. The early occurrence of migration dates back to the period when the British administrator invited the peasants from East Bengal to settle in Goalpara district of Assam. In 1947 when East Bengal became East Pakistan then many people, mainly Hindu population fled to Assam for the fear of life. This phenomenon continued for a long period. The same process was repeated again in 1971 when Bangladesh was formed as an independent state.

At the time of partition of India, the migrated people were recognized as political refugee and the Indian government allowed them to settle in Indian territory mainly in West Bengal and Assam. 19 July 1948 is taken as the cut off date for acquiring Indian citizenship for rest of India except Assam. This means that only those people who came to India before that date will be regarded as Indian Citizen. But for Assam in order to tackle the issue of illegal immigrants the cut off date was set as 25 March, 1971, by the Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 popularly called IMDT act. (Goswami, 2006) This act was declared unconstitutional by a three judged bench of Supreme Court of India on 12 July, 2005 because it violates Art. 355, which states that the centre has the duty to protect every state against external aggression and internal disturbance. (Goswami, 2006) However the controversy regarding the cut off date is still unsettled.

In the decade 1951-1961, the growth rate of population in the Assam was 34.95 per cent as against the national growth rate of 24.80 per cent. During 1961-1971, it was 34.95 per cent for Assam as against the national growth rate of 24.80 per cent and in 1971-1991; it was 52.44 per cent for the state and 48.24 at the national level. In the decade, 1991-2001, the population of Assam grew by 18.92 per cent, whereas the growth rate for the country was 22.66 per cent, decreasing for the first time since 1921-1931. (Nandy, 2005) Table 1 provides the Hindu and Muslim population growth rate of Assam and India.

Table 1: Hindu and Muslim population growth rate

Year	Assam		All-India	
	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim
1951-1961	33.71	38.35	20.29	25.61
1961-1971	37.17	30.99	23.72	30.85
1971-1991	41.89	77.42	48.38	55.04

(Note: There was no census in Assam in 1981 because of the Assam agitation)

Source: The S.K. Sinha Report on Illegal Migration into Assam, 1998

The decadal growth of Muslims between 1961 and 1971 was 30.99 per cent. Since no census was held in the state in 1981, the growth between 1971 and 1991 was 77.42 percent for Assam and it was 55.04 per cent at the national level. On the other hand, the rate of growth of Hindus since 1961 has been 37.17 per cent, and 41.89 per cent, for the period 1971-1991.

The S.K. Sinha report on Illegal migration in Assam, 1998 points out quoting Bangladesh census records, that there was a reduction of 39 lakh Hindus between 1971 and 1981 and another 36 lakh between 1981 and 1989; and contends that these 75 lakh Hindus have obviously come into India.

The phenomenon has continued to exist even after fierce resistance from time to time from all corners of society in Assam. The issue has become a political rhetoric and the genuine concern for solving the issue is not much visible in the current situation.

### Factors Responsible for Migration:

Bangladesh is considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world.(Ahmed, 2004) It is also the “eighth-most populated country in the world with the highest population density – nearly 950 persons per square kilometre”.(World Bank, 2003) Pestilential cyclones, floods and rivers eroding large tracts of inhabited areas are common recurrent phenomena leaving a trail of destruction and destitute every year. The pressure on land is easily gauged from the fact that over 140 million people inhabit 143,998 square kilometre of territory of which cultivable land stands at 59 per cent of the total land area. Water bodies, human settlements, forests and roads cover the remaining area. In 2000, the land-man ratio was 1:18 decimal and is understood to have narrowed further in the past five years.(Ahsan and Ahmed, 2003) Thus, undue increase in population growth and resultant pressure on natural resources has created an environmental crisis in Bangladesh. Consequently, economic opportunities have shrunk and there has been massive outflow of people from the country.

In a study Gogoi (2005) notes that geographical distance between the place of origin and the place of destination has significant effect on migration. Thus, Assam being the next door to Bangladesh, it receives large number of the migrants entering India.

Poor border management on the Indian side facilitates immigration from Bangladesh. Assam shares a highly porous 262 kilometre border with Bangladesh with portions of it left completely unchecked due to the difficult nature of the terrain. Out of 262 km Assam-Bangladesh border, 92 km is covered by the river Brahmaputra which flows along the border of Dhubri district. (Nath and Nath, 2010) It constitutes total 35% of the Assam-Bangladesh

border. In Karimganj the international border has hilly terrain. Along the Dhubri border Brahmaputra River creates a ‘perforated land bridge’ (Ahmed, 2014) in the winter months when the Char areas are formed due to drying up of the river water. This portion of the border is often referred to as ‘porous border’. Only 176.07 km of the border is protected with fencing. (Nath and Nath, 2010)

At innumerable points of the land border the human habitats on both sides can hardly be differentiated, making it perfectly natural and almost legitimate to access each other’s territory without any let or hindrance.

Gogoi (2005) finds that while land-man ratio is a significant determinant of migration, there is little evidence to support that per capita income differential has led to migration from Bangladesh to Assam. In contrast, Kumar and Aggarwal (2003) find income differentials to be a significant factor for international migration into Assam.

### **Consequences of Illegal Migration into Assam**

Migration leads to several consequences in the host country. Studies have shown that there are some small to some far reaching consequences of illegal migration in Assam. Migration creates impact on the overall socio-economic, political and demographic aspects of the host country. The districts of Assam which are mostly affected by the problem of illegal migration are Goalpara, Dhubri, Darrang, Nagaon, Barpeta and Nalbari. Other districts of Assam are also by and large affected by this problem.

The Supreme court of India has recognized the impact of illegal migrants from Bangladesh during the hearing of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by a lawyer O.P. Saxena representing All India Lawyers Forum for Civil Liberties in the following words, “Bangladeshi migrants are eating into the economy of the country and had become to a large extent a security threat.”(Shamshad, 2008)

The S.K Sinha report on Illegal migration in Assam, 1998 says that the influx of migrants threatens to reduce the Assamese people to a minority in their own state. Sinha, in forwarding letter to the President, stated, “Large-scale illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of this State. It poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security” (Sinha Report, 1998)

### **Political Consequences:**

The normal pattern seen in case of settlement of the illegal migrants from Bangladesh is that once they settle in some place, they start to get engaged in the economic activities as labourers. In fertile rural areas and *char areas* of the Brahmaputra, they gradually open up land for cultivation and thus permanently settle in the places. In the meantime many manage to procure voter ID cards owing to the vote bank politics of the political parties and lapse in the administration of these affairs by government departments. This particular act has caused much harm to the interests of the state.

In a number of constituencies a sizeable number of suspected D-Voters create a major issue of concern. According to Government of Assam's White Paper on Foreigner's Issue, the letter "D" (doubtful/disputed citizenship status) was marked against a total of 2,31,657 people who could not prove their citizenship. (Government of Assam, 2012)

The 1931 census report for the first time pointed out to the danger of illegal migration in Assam. The chief author of the census report C.S.Mullan stated it as "invasion". (Mullan, 1931). This has triggered wide reactions in Assam. However, Amalendu Guha (Guha, 1977) noted that Mullan "mischievously" used the term 'invasion'. Noted Political Scientist of MIT Myron Weiner also wondered about whether there exists some threshold of "overforeignisation" that triggers reaction from the natives. (Weiner, 1993)

There is a repeated tone in media that when the foreigners start to give political mandate in Assembly elections by registering themselves as voters, then sometimes the interests of the locals get jeopardized. The apprehension among the natives of Assam has gone to the extent of a perceived threat that Assam might become a part of greater Bangladesh. One particular website hosted by 'westbengalbelongstobangladesh' posts slogans like 'Slumdog Indian State of West Bengal belongs to Greater Bangladesh', 'Slumdog Indian State of Assam also belongs to Greater Bangladesh', 'Bangladesh+West Bengal+Assam=Greater Bangladesh'etc.<sup>1</sup>

### **Economic Consequences:**

It is important to recognize that there are both beneficial and harmful effects of migration on the economy. The Bangladeshi migrants work primarily in the agricultural sector or in the urban informal sector. The peasant migrants from the erstwhile East Bengal in the beginning of the twentieth century brought with them better cultivation techniques and greater varieties of crops. They also introduced multiple cropping that was not practiced by the natives. (Madhab, 2006)

Thus, they contributed to rise in productivity of agriculture in Assam. Because of this contribution, Assam had a rice surplus by as early as 1947 and also had a number of vegetables and crops earlier unknown in the state. (Goswami, 2007)

Large-scale immigration creates tremendous pressure on land. Since the primary motive of immigration from Bangladesh is to acquire land and other assets. They are mainly engaged in agricultural activities which create direct as well as indirect consequences for agricultural productivity. As a result of it, the average land holding has been constantly declining (see Table 2).

Table 2: Agricultural Land Holdings in Assam and India

Year	No. of Holdings	ASSAM			ALL INDIA	
		Total operated	Average size of	No. of Holdings	Total operated	Average size of

<sup>1</sup> West Bengal belongs to Greater Bangladesh available at [www.westbengalbelongstobangladesh.wordpress.com](http://www.westbengalbelongstobangladesh.wordpress.com)

		areas(in Thousand Hectares)	holdings (in hectares)		areas(in Thousand Hectares)	holdings (in hectares)
1970-71	1964376	2882	1.47			
1976-77	2253654	3079	1.37			
1980-81	2297588	3121	1.36			
1985-86	2419156	3161	1.31			
1990-91	2523379	3205	1.27	106637	165507	1.55
1995-96	2682997	3138	1.17	115580	163357	1.41

Source: Economic Survey of Assam: 2003-04, p.19

Illegal immigration has influenced the overall economic performance of the state through its effects on the society. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration has led to political unrest and ethnic tension. In last several years Assam witnessed frequent Assam Bandhs over the issue of opposition of the issue of illegal migration. Consequently, these have adverse affect on the economy.

### Social Consequences:

Threat to cultural identity is the major social impact of the illegal migration in Assam. In the absence of integration in case of the migrants from Bangladesh there is lack of social cohesion in Assam. It has created a problem of identity crisis in Assam. Identity is not a very simple concept. It is a complex and continued process, not a static one. (Glebova)The “assamese identity” has become a much contested issue. There is a variety of opinion regarding who is an Assamese. The identity issue was a main agenda of the Assam Agitation (1975-81) and the Assam Accord of 1985 featured a definition of who is an Assamese.

In the process of migration integration is most desired in order to maintain the cohesiveness of the host country. The term integration usually refers to the involvement of the migrants in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the host country. The Global Commission points out the desirability of integration in the following words, “Migrants and citizens of destination country should respect their legal obligations and benefit from a mutual process of adaptation and integration that accommodates cultural diversity and fosters social cohesion. The integration process should be actively supported by local and national authorities, members of civil society, and should be based on commitment to non-discrimination and gender equity. It should also be informed by an objective public, political and media discourse on international migration.”(GCIM, 2005) But all these desired elements are not present in the context of migration from Bangladesh into India.

Media plays a very important role in this identity issue. Identity is discursively constructed and produced through media.(Glebova, p.21) Referring to the role of English medium Newspapers of Assam, Glebova points out that the Sentinel questions their Assamese identity, the Assam Tribune argues for the protection of Assamese Muslims as ‘Genuine Minorities’. The Assam Tribune creates a distinction between Bangladeshi Muslims and Assamese Muslims as “fake” and “genuine”.

The identity issue has another side which is that the people of Assam feel threatened that this large influx of people from the neighbouring state may outnumber the native population and thus serving a threat in the hearts of the natives.

## Conclusion

There is a genuine concern for the interests of the migrants who are not welcome in India but at the same time not welcome in Bangladesh either. What happened in Satgachi area in 2006 explains this fact, where several hundred people spent days in the so-called 'No-Man's Land' between India and Bangladesh while both the governments were refusing to accept them.(Bhaumik, 2005) There are some unfortunate and may be unavoidable, reasons for which they keep coming to a place where they know they are not welcome. An Indian journalist said, "No number of barbed wires, fences or machine guns, it is clear, can stop the movement of the desperately poor to where they think they may find food and shelter."(Swami, 2003)

In this situation both the neighbouring countries need to get engaged in bilateral solution to the problem by rising above politics and holding onto some human consideration. Goodwill of the people in power can bring a direction of change in this otherwise pathetic state of affairs. No such thinking is seen as yet in the political level and some political parties have tried to cash in on the issue by opposing the immigration to get political support among the majority Hindu Assamese community,(Glebova, p 26) while some other parties are alleged to support the immigration behind the scene for the hope of getting political support from the immigrant community.

Here, we would like to put some recommendations taken at a two-day National Seminar on "Illegal Migration from Bangladesh" organized by Astha Bharati in association with the Centre for North-East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) in New Delhi on 27 and 28 November, 2001:

- Illegal migration from Bangladesh must be recognized as a national problem and not a regional issue. The Central and State Governments must not underplay the gravity of the threat posed to national security.
- All political parties should put the issue of illegal migration and their view on ways to tackle it on their agenda.
- 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. .
- Preventive measures should be taken urgently to curb further illegal migration. The existing Border Security Force posts and the BSF water wing should be strengthened and border fencing, patrolling and lighting should be improved.
- The National Register of Citizens of 1951 should be reviewed, computerized and updated. The process of updating the NRC should be done regularly and citizen registration should be made compulsory by law.

- Governments, non-government organizations and media should launch campaigns to educate the public about the dangers inherent in illegal influx.

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