

# **Illegal Immigration to Assam: A Contemporary Crisis**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Owing concerns to the national security issues of India given birth to as a result of cross-border migration, it has become an issue of pertinence to protect the country's territorial integrity and social harmony. Illegal immigrants from Bangladesh form a significant fraction of the population of Assam. These illegal immigrants are the roots of severe identity crises among the Assamese community and have also entailed significant adverse effects on the socio-economic and political environment of the state. These immigrants also posed a severe threat to the nation's internal security. This paper scrutinizes various aspects of this illegal mass migration from Bangladesh. The paper first attempts to draw a history of immigration from Bangladesh to Assam and further discusses the different social, economic, and political impacts of such immigration on the community and the state. The main issues leading to this mass influx of immigrants in Assam are the easy availability of cultivable lands and the economic opportunities. However, the tremendous pressure by these immigrants on the resources has outweighed the benefits to the nation from their immigration. The study indicates that deportation of these migrants has become next to impossible due to the political support backing these illegal migrants in pursuit of their selfish vote interest. Furthermore, these migrants have turned into one of the major causes leading to ethnocultural conflicts and political agitation, keeping the social harmony and peace of the native citizens at stake. Any delay in taking strict measures in solving this unceasing national concern can result in the loss of this state to the Bangladeshi nationals.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Immigration, Illegal Migration, Assam, Bangladesh, D-Voter, Identity Crisis, Socio-Economic, Ethnic Dilemma.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

“Migration on a permanent or temporary basis has been one of the most important survival strategies adopted by people for centuries in the face of natural or human-caused disasters.” (Bhardwaj 2014, 61) The primary factors leading to migration underlies wars, climatic change and other socio-economic factors. Migration, in its literal terms, refers to crossing a political border and entering the administrative unit of another political nation and blending with the ethnic community of that region. Inter-migration means movement within the same nation; International migration refers to the movement across the political frontiers of separate nations. The influx of Bengali dominating population as immigrants from a region now known as “Bangladesh” into the North-Eastern states of India is a mass migration phenomenon which dates to the late 19th century and continues upon – the partition of India and emergence of Bangladesh from East Pakistan in 1971. The issue of migration, rather illegal migration from Bangladesh to Assam, bears immense importance, particularly after the murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in 1975.

The migration leading to an increase in the Muslim population in Assam was encouraged after the creation of the All-India Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906. The inflow of these immigrants did not stop even after the formation of “Bangladesh” as an outcome of the suppression of the minorities in the Muslim-dominating nation. “In fact, about ten million Hindus took refuge in India during the liberation war of Bangladesh. Many went back but a sizeable undocumented section stayed back and mingled with the mainstream of India's life.” (Bhardwaj 2014, 61) This mass migration did not only disrupt the demographic structure of the Indian bordering states but also led to various unwanted socio-economic tension in those regions. “Though this migration had been taking place historically, these people were not recognized as Bangladeshi migrants until 1971.” (Saikia 2017, 2) It was after the emergence of “Bangladesh” from “East Pakistan”; that these migrants were tagged as “illegal Bangladeshi migrants”. However, the issue of migrants from Bangladesh has always been a controversial political concern for a long time.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The focal point of this research paper lies in the impacts of the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in Assam. The various parameters drawn to study the impact on the nation and the region are – occupational threat, land and resource destruction, distortion of socio-culture and demographic structure, disturbance in the

biodiversity and ecological system and the unsolved issue of 'D – voters'. Although, on humanitarian grounds, the illegal migrants are permitted to seek shelter in India, however, the threat they pose to the citizens of Assam is highly neglected.

### **III. DISCUSSION**

One of the most compelling factors encouraging migration from Bangladesh to Assam is the difference in the current wage rate. The higher wage rate in Assam incentivises the poverty-stricken and unemployed population of Bangladesh to migrate. Due to a lack of education, these Bangladeshi immigrants have methodically appropriated themselves into labour, agriculture, grazing and forest lands for their bread and butter, displacing the native workers. However, the native population have borne a high cost for the means of survival of these migrants. Due to a large influx of these immigrants, Assam has witnessed an increase in population with a substantial number of people each year. This population explosion is one of the main reasons for a decrease in the labour wage level.

Furthermore, the general controversy lies in the harmful consequence of this immigration rather than this illegal immigration which can be seen as prevalent in the labour market. Due to desperation and hunger for employment, these illegal immigrants readily supply cheap labour, giving birth to apprehension or rather a fear among the native population that the jobs and occupations which otherwise would have belonged to the indigenous population have now been taken away by these immigrants. This overcrowding of job traffic by Bangladeshi immigrants meant for the indigenous people in certain circumstances can lead to malicious competition and conflict.

The heavy impact of immigrants on the outcome of the labour market is clearly evident as the supply of cheap labour has obviously brought the producers and service consumers in Assam to an advantageous position. On the other hand, there is an unfavourable employment situation prevailing among the educated natives and due to the lack of education among the illegal immigrants, they do not compete for the same jobs. However, what should not be left unrecognised is that the heirs and children of these immigrants have no access to proper education, eradicating the illiteracy among them, which further might aggravate the unemployment conditions of educated natives. "Thus, Illegal migration from Bangladesh is rather a 'self-rescue' migration that is, fleeing from poverty, hunger, political and religious persecution, governmental apathy and a dark future in Bangladesh, than a response to a demand for labour in India." (Das 2016, 34)

#### **History of Migration in Assam**

"Migration of outsiders into Assam has a long history." (Sharma 2015, 81) During the Colonial Rule, the British administration encouraged thousands of workers and labourers from Bihar to work as tea-plantation workers. Simultaneously, thousands and thousands of Bengali peasants were also persuaded to settle on the vast virgin lands of Assam. Further, in 1971 Assam saw an influx of millions of refugees seeking shelter in the state. However, after the formation of Bangladesh as an autonomous nation from East Pakistan, most returned, leaving a substantial number of refugees still seeking shelter in Assam. After 1971, another stream of a massive number of desperate land-hungry Bangladeshi peasants in Assam flew. By that time, Assam had already started facing scarcity of land, and the indigenous population, including the peasants, feared a loss of their land holdings.

"The demographic transformation of Assam created apprehension among many Assamese that the swamping of Assam by foreigners and non-Assamese Indians would lead to the Assamese being reduced to a minority in their land and consequently to the subordination of their language and culture, loss of control over their economy and politics, and, in the end, the loss of their very identity and individuality as a people." (Das 2016, 53) This demographic evolution gave birth to a sense of cultural and political insecurity among the Assamese population, sowing seeds of discontent towards these immigrants among the locals. Further, this episode instigated and provoked the rise of a movement against these illegal Bangladeshi immigrants by the locals in the 1980s. "This resentment has led to intense competition between the migrants and the natives for resources." (Das 2016, 9) The growth in the number of immigrants erected a sense of an existential threat to the Assamese identity and economic well-being of the Assamese people among the indigenous Assamese community, apprehending jeopardy in their cultural existence. They feared the ceasing of their political control and loss of employment opportunities to such Bangladeshi illegal migrants. Adding to this was the dread of becoming a minority in their homeland. Thus, due to the fear of diluting their cultural and ethnic diversity, the Assamese community built a wall of resentment towards these illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

Examining the research study on occupational threats from the Bangladeshi immigrants, it can be deduced that unemployment and unavailability of economic opportunities in Bangladesh have compelled the nationals to migrate from their homeland. It can be observed that the fundamental reason behind this threat is the displacement of the native population by the migrant population in occupational areas such as the labour market. These migrants provide cheap labour due to desperation for unemployment, which results in a scarcity of such opportunities for the indigenous community, thus building a major occupational threat for the local population.

The study also directs toward the lack of responsibility of the Bangladeshi governmental department, failing to ensure a thriving economic environment for its citizen, which in turn is causing tension in other nations too.

#### **IV. FINDINGS**

“In recent decades, Assam has witnessed a rise in ethnic tensions and militancy, which to a large extent has been triggered by this pressure on their land created by the illegal immigrants.” (Nath and Nath 2010, 24) As land and asset acquirement serves as one of the significant incentives for these migrants, there is a large population influx of these migrants due to the easy availability of land and other resources in Assam. Such population influx results in an increasing scarcity of land and resources. Moreover, with their crucial involvement in agricultural activities, the pressure that had mounted on land has exhibited direct and indirect impact on agricultural productivity. This constantly increasing pressure on land has led to a decline in the average land holding and the accessibility of cultivable land per capita. For a state like Assam, largely dependent on agriculture, such small-scale land ownership indicates improper utilization of cultivable land, thus having adverse effects and loss of efficiency in agricultural production. This tension became unceasing as these immigrants even encroached on the land mainly reserved for the tribal community.

These illegal migrants barely contribute to the state government revenue, thus adding up to the pressure on the government. On the other hand, the state government disburses a large amount on the maintenance of immigrants, who comprise a large portion of the population. “Despite the fact that historically migration has contributed to the economic development of Assam, the sheer scale of it in recent times seems to have had adverse effects that have outweighed the benefits.” (Nath and Nath 2010, 3) Furthermore, as the number of immigrants flowing into the state increases, a simultaneous increase in the competition and conflicts between the local people and these migrants for land, employment and other scarce resources occurs. The sentiment of hatred of the natives towards these illegal migrants is further aggravated due to the increasing scarcity of resources, depriving the native citizens of their rightful share in the state resources. This further gives birth to other socio-political conflicts. “Swayed by such persistent political pronouncements, the city dwellers demand the deportation of these illegal migrants.” (Das 2016, 49)

#### **Socio-Economic Impact of Illegal Immigration**

The increasing influx of these illegal immigrants has created an identity crisis among the native and indigenous populations. It has also given them the fear of being reduced to a minority and losing political control to these illegal migrants in their homeland. “The failure of the government to respond to 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.” (Das and Talukdar 2016, 4) The driving force of this political tension and disturbance can also be summed down to the population trafficking by these migrants in the unskilled labour markets, undermining the employment opportunities for the indigenous community. The threat to national security and peace as a result of illegal migration from Bangladesh is unceasing due to the increasing population growth of these illegal migrants. “The erstwhile migration problem has now metamorphosed from being a demographic, economic and cultural challenge into a national security threat owing to the violent non-state actors’ activities occurring across the borders.” (Bhardwaj 2014, 60)

The migrant population in a region has often resulted in alteration of the socio-economic conditions and culture of the region. Migration - particularly illegal migration from Bangladesh, turned into an alarming political issue in 1979 when it was recognized that large numbers of these illegal immigrants had become voters in Assam. “Afraid of their acquiring a dominant role in Assam’s politics through the coming election at the end of 1979, the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (Assam People’s Struggle Council), a coalition of regional political, literary and cultural associations, started a massive, anti-illegal migration movement.” (Basu 2018, 11) This movement brought the number of total illegal immigrants to light, which was as high as 31 to 34% of the state’s population. The other primary political concern relating to these migrants was the unsolved issue of ‘D voters’ - Doubtful voters. This segment of voters included those migrants who were marked with an uncertain status of citizenship by the Election Commission due to a lack of proper evidence of citizenship.

The ethnicity of the indigenous population of Assam has crucially been jeopardized due to the influx of immigrants from Bangladesh. It can be analyzed that this phenomenon of mass migration and blending into the Assamese community by the Bangladeshi migrants have given birth to a sense of cultural and political insecurity among the Assamese community. The indigenous people fear that they will become a minority in their homeland due to a heavy influx of migrants yearly. The government should enforce strict measures to deport these migrants before the nation loses this rich state to Bangladesh in the coming future.

These immigrants have not only led to social and economic conflicts but have also jeopardized and

threatened India's national security. The presence of these immigrants among the citizen of the nation puts these citizens at risk of exposure to terrorism, as these immigrants can potentially enable external terror groups from Pakistan and China. Further, this regional issue became a severe national concern when the 'D- voters' issue was recognized. It can be observed and analyzed that presence of these "fake voters" is encouraged by political parties in pursuit of votes. However, in order to eradicate this issue, these immigrants should legally be tagged as "immigrants" and not be allowed to claim the status of an Indian citizen or should strictly be deported back with formal procedures.

### **Impact of Illegal Immigration on Biodiversity**

Although environmental degradation causes migration, migration, on the other hand, can also cause environmental degradation in the receiving areas, and Assam is no exception. Looking at the history of Assam for the past 100 years, it is seen that Assam, like any other state of India, is experiencing loss of its biodiversity due to various human and environmental factors." (Sharma 2015, 165) The land area of Assam was extensively covered with forest, and the riverine belts were largely uninhabited. These forestlands were home to several endangered wildlife species, and the rivers were the only source for freshwater fish. Due to access to such vast public lands, most migrants often encroached upon these areas, divesting the natives and tribes of their land. Such unplanned growth of human settlement and activities in areas having rich biodiversity had led to deforestation, and loss of wildlife and water, further resulting in severe damage to the geo-ecological conditions of the state but has also built ethnic tension among the native population. Furthermore, this encroachment by the Bangladeshi immigrants has not only resulted in the depletion of the forest but also has adversely affected the ecosystem of Assam, posing a severe threat to the region's long-term weather and climatic conditions.

"Large areas of forestland were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation. The state experienced declining per cent of land area under forest from 39% in 1951-52 to about 30%." (Das and Talukdar 2016, 3) Such rapid human settlement has deteriorated the quality of forests to a level, some of which have now been degraded to mere scrubs and open forests. The primary occupation of these immigrants is agriculture, which makes their survival greatly dependent on forest products. However, with the increasing population of immigrants, tremendous pressure was built on the natural resources in these forests, resulting in the shrinking of these forests and woodlands. Assam is a state known for its rich biodiversity, which it is losing to these illegal immigrants who, in order to fulfil their interests, knowingly or unknowingly caused substantial damage to the biodiversity of Assam. This leads to an end to the state's pride and gives birth to unwanted political unrest among the native community.

Biodiversity is the pride of Assam. It is alarming that a state like Assam, which was once extensively covered with forest belts, now must take measures to save these forests. The research clearly shows that due to the tremendous pressure exerted by the Bangladeshi immigrants on these natural resources, the forests are turning into mere scrubs, the woodlands are shrinking, and there has been an immense loss of wildlife and water. These migrants have destroyed the state's ecological system, seriously damaging the nation's pride. Furthermore, the easy availability of vast cultivable lands in Assam has invited millions of land-hungry peasants in the form of immigrants from Bangladesh. These immigrants encroach over these land and resources, divesting the native and tribal communities of their land. Such deprivation of these ethnic groups of their land has given rise to immense ethnic tension in these regions. Such encroachments lead to a decline in the per capita holding of these lands, thus, wasting the cultivability. Proper arrangements for the shelter of these migrants should be made to reduce the resource pressure on Assam; also, restrictions should be put on human activities in areas with such a rich ecosystem before it becomes extinct.

### **D-Voters in Assam: The Political Impact of Illegal Immigration**

"At present, there are about 147,000 'D' voters in Assam and another 12,480 were added before the election of 2011." (Dutta, 2011) This category of voters primarily included the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, but on the other hand, it also included some actual Indian citizens who failed to provide proper evidence to prove their citizenship. The influx of these migrants, in the long run, has not only distorted the diversity of the region but also has gravely impacted the political conditions of the region, giving rise to unwanted ethnic tension and political chaos. Further, increasing competition between the natives and the migrants to gain political control has also had adverse effects on the state economy. Most of these Bangladeshi immigrants had got their names on the voter's list illegally under the nurturing of some political parties, as they were potential vote banks for such political parties. This issue has now lifted from merely being a regional issue to a national concern of immense importance, as these fake voters claiming to be citizens of India pose a severe threat to the nation's internal security.

"Illegal migration from Bangladesh has also posed a serious threat to the national security, peace, social harmony and the economic well-being of the citizens of India. The presence of a large number of illegal immigrants potentially enables external actors like Pakistan and China to influence events in the Northeast. 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." (Das and Talukdar 2016, 3) The conflict and tension between the natives and migrants over the scarce resources, cultural dominance and economic benefits have fuelled violence resulting in protests and agitations against illegal migrants. The fear of the indigenous population for their cultural, social and economic survival being jeopardized due to the increasing flow of Bangladeshi immigrants has led to intense resentment of the natives towards them. This resentment has given rise to the unwanted political agitation and unrest between the natives and the migrants, jeopardizing the nation's internal security and threatening the communal harmony and peace of the state.

## V. CONCLUSION

A tremendous conflict with its roots so deep in history cannot be solved overnight. However, the unceasing and severe impacts of this massive illegal migration from Bangladesh on Assam and the nation must be further stressed. The intricacies involved in the regional issue arising out of this phenomenon are no more a mere issue but now have turned into a concern for the nation, threatening the internal peace and security of the entire nation. The tranquillity of the state has been completely shaken due to the unwanted intrusion of the immigrants in every sector of the native community, from economic sectors to political sectors to even the social and environmental sectors of the region.

This silent demographic invasion has given birth to a serious identity crisis among the indigenous community of Assam, which, if unsolved, will soon turn these indigenous people into a minority group in their homeland. The ethnic and political tension arising out of the cultural and political insecurity of the natives will prevail till the influx of these immigrants does not stop. The fear of loss of dominance on their very own land has compelled the native people to resort to movements like protest and agitation that, in turn, disturb the peace and sanctity of the entire region. However, the threats do not end here. This rapidly increasing influx of Bangladeshi immigrants may even turn these Northeastern districts of India into a Bangladeshi dominant region. It will then only be a matter of time when demand for integration of Assam into Bangladesh may be made. Thus, it is high time that the severity of the issue regarding Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam is recognized and strict actions are taken to save the Assamese people in their land from the threat of such immigrants before the nation loses a beautiful and affluent part of its map.

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