



CROSS-BORDER MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH: ASSESSING SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

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Abstract

Cross-Border migration of Bangladeshi nationals to India poses serious security challenges to India. Not only has it significantly altered the demographic composition of the places where immigration is rampant, but it has also resulted in ethnic tensions and conflict, seriously undermining the security of India. This paper examines the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration from the security perspective and explores the policy options open to India to deal with this menace

Key Words

Migration, Bangladesh, India, security, policy interventions

Introduction

The phenomenon of illegal migration from Bangladesh to India constitutes one of South Asia's most enduring and contentious security challenges. Since India's partition in 1947, sustained cross-border population movements have transformed the demographic, political, and security landscape of India's northeastern region, particularly in the states of Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal. The magnitude and persistence of this migration have implications extending beyond border management to encompass internal security, ethnic relations, resource competition, and regional stability (Kumar, 2010).

This article provides a comprehensive examination of illegal Bangladeshi migration as a security threat to India, structured around four key objectives. First, it analyzes the multiple security dimensions of unauthorized migration, including internal security threats, demographic transformation, and regional stability implications. Second, it reviews existing legislative frameworks and border management strategies, assessing their effectiveness and identifying implementation gaps. Third, it synthesizes empirical findings from scholarly literature to provide an evidence-based assessment of the security challenges. Fourth, it proposes strategic recommendations for policy interventions and security enhancements that address both immediate security concerns and underlying structural factors.

2. Security Dimensions of Illegal Bangladeshi Migration

2.1 Internal Security Threats

Illegal Bangladeshi migration poses multifaceted internal security threats to India, primarily through its linkages with insurgency, terrorism, and organized crime. The porous Indo-Bangladesh border has been systematically exploited by various insurgent groups operating in India's northeastern states, who utilize cross-border sanctuaries, smuggling networks, and migrant communities for logistical support, recruitment, and operational mobility (Meitei,2023)

Empirical evidence indicates that terrorist and insurgent organizations have used the long and porous border to wage campaigns against the Indian state (Krishnan, 2002). The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and other separatist groups have historically maintained bases and training camps in Bangladesh, facilitating cross-border attacks and evading Indian security forces. The April 2001 border clashes, which resulted in the deaths of 16 Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel, exemplify the violent dimensions of border security challenges (Krishnan, 2002). The post-9/11 security environment has intensified concerns about the potential nexus between illegal migration and Islamist terrorism. Security analysts have raised alarms about the possibility of terrorist infiltration through migration channels and the radicalization of migrant communities (Shewly,2018)

Beyond insurgency and terrorism, illegal migration has been associated with various forms of organized crime, including human trafficking, drug smuggling, arms trafficking, and counterfeit currency circulation. Criminal networks that facilitate unauthorized border crossings often engage in multiple illicit activities, creating complex security challenges that transcend migration management (Nandy,2019). The criminalization of migration through smuggling networks undermines state authority and creates parallel economies that operate outside legal frameworks. The internal security implications extend to law enforcement challenges in areas with significant unauthorized migrant populations. The difficulty of identifying and documenting illegal migrants complicates policing, creates jurisdictional ambiguities, and strains administrative resources.

2.2 Demographic Shifts and Ethnic Tensions

Perhaps the most contentious dimension of illegal Bangladeshi migration concerns its demographic impact on India's northeastern states. Sustained migration over decades has significantly altered the demographic composition of several districts in Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal, generating perceptions of demographic invasion and triggering ethnic mobilization among indigenous communities.

In Assam, the demographic transformation has been particularly pronounced. Studies document alarming rates of population growth in districts bordering Bangladesh, attributed largely to migration rather than natural increase (Saikia,2012). The spatial distribution of population growth reveals distinct patterns, with Muslim-majority areas experiencing disproportionate increases, fuelling perceptions of demographic engineering (Saikia,2012) Indigenous tribal populations have expressed acute concerns about becoming minorities in their ancestral lands, framing migration as an existential threat to their cultural identity and political autonomy.

The demographic shifts have catalyzed intense ethnic tensions and communal conflicts. The Assam Movement (1979-1985), which demanded the detection and deportation of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, represented a watershed moment in the politicization of migration. The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, which established March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for citizenship eligibility, but implementation has remained contentious and incomplete. Subsequent ethnic violence, including the Nellie massacre of 1983, which claimed thousands of lives, underscores the explosive potential of migration-related tensions.

In Tripura, demographic transformation has been even more dramatic. The indigenous tribal population, which constituted a majority at the time of independence, has been reduced to a minority due to sustained migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh (Deb et al., 2017) This demographic inversion has generated profound

anxieties among tribal communities and fuelled separatist movements demanding greater autonomy or statehood .

The demographic security concerns extend beyond numerical changes to encompass resource competition and political representation. Migrants and indigenous communities compete for land, employment, educational opportunities, and government benefits, creating zero-sum perceptions that exacerbate tensions. The electoral implications of demographic change have further politicized the issue, with allegations that political parties cultivate migrant vote banks, thereby incentivizing continued illegal migration.

2.3 Regional Stability Implications

Illegal Bangladeshi migration has significant implications for regional stability in South Asia, affecting bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh, creating potential for interstate conflict. The migration issue has been a persistent irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations. India's concerns about illegal migration and border security have often clashed with Bangladesh's sensitivities about sovereignty and its reluctance to acknowledge the existence of large-scale unauthorized migration. Bangladesh has historically denied that significant illegal migration occurs, arguing that population movements are either historical (predating 1971) or temporary and seasonal. This fundamental disagreement over the nature and scale of migration has hindered bilateral cooperation on border management and migrant repatriation.

Border incidents and tensions have periodically escalated, threatening bilateral relations. The killing of Bangladeshi nationals by Indian border forces, often characterized as smugglers or illegal migrants by Indian authorities and as innocent civilians by Bangladeshi media, has generated public outrage in Bangladesh and diplomatic friction. The construction of border fencing by India, while intended to enhance security, has been criticized by Bangladesh as unilateral action that violates bilateral agreements and affects border communities. The migration issue intersects with broader regional security dynamics, including water-sharing disputes, trade relations, and counterterrorism cooperation. The inability to resolve migration-related tensions constrains progress on other bilateral issues and limits the potential for deeper regional integration (Nandy, 2019).

The regional stability implications extend to India's internal cohesion. The concentration of migration impacts in northeastern states, combined with the region's history of insurgency and ethnic conflict, creates vulnerabilities that could be exploited by hostile actors . The perception that the central government has failed to protect the interests of northeastern populations against illegal migration has fuelled alienation and separatist sentiments .

3. Policy Analysis: Legislative Frameworks and Border Management

3.1 Legislative Instruments

India's policy response to illegal Bangladeshi migration has evolved through multiple legislative instruments, each reflecting different historical contexts and political priorities. However, the legislative framework has been characterized by inconsistencies, implementation gaps, and political contestation that have undermined its effectiveness (Kumar, 2015).

The Foreigners Act of 1946, inherited from the colonial era, provides the foundational legal framework for regulating the entry, residence, and exit of foreigners in India. The Act empowers the central government to determine who qualifies as a foreigner and to deport individuals found to be residing illegally. However, the Act's implementation in the context of Bangladeshi migration has been hampered by the difficulty of establishing nationality and the absence of cooperation from Bangladesh in accepting deportees.

The Citizenship Act of 1955, as amended multiple times, establishes the criteria for Indian citizenship and the procedures for naturalization . The Act has been particularly contentious in the context of Bangladeshi migration, with debates centering on the appropriate cut-off date for citizenship eligibility and the treatment of different religious communities. The Assam Accord of 1985 established March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date

for Assam, but implementation through the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has been fraught with controversy .

The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act (IMDT Act) of 1983, applicable only to Assam, created a distinct legal framework for identifying and deporting illegal migrants. The Act established specialized tribunals and placed the burden of proof on the complainant rather than the accused, making deportation extremely difficult. Critics argued that the IMDT Act was politically motivated, designed to protect illegal migrants who constituted a vote bank for certain political parties (Ghosh,2019). The Supreme Court of India struck down the IMDT Act in 2005, ruling that it violated the constitutional rights of Indian citizens and facilitated illegal migration

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) of 2019 represents the most recent and controversial legislative intervention. The CAA provides a pathway to citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh who entered India before December 31, 2014, explicitly excluding Muslims . Proponents argue that the CAA addresses the plight of persecuted religious minorities, while critics contend that it discriminates on religious grounds, violates constitutional principles of secularism, and creates a two-tier system for citizenship. The CAA has generated widespread protests, particularly in Assam, where indigenous communities fear it will legitimize illegal migration and further alter demographic balances (Deb,et.al.2017)].

3.2 Border Management Strategies

India's border management strategy along the Indo-Bangladesh frontier has evolved from a relatively open border regime to increasingly militarized control, centered on physical barriers, enhanced surveillance, and expanded deployment of security forces (Jamwal,2004). The construction of border fencing represents the most visible element of India's border management strategy. As of recent assessments, approximately 3,300 kilometers of the border have been fenced, with gaps remaining in riverine areas, difficult terrain, and locations where land acquisition has been problematic. The effectiveness of fencing in preventing illegal migration remains contested. Technological enhancements to border surveillance have been pursued through the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS), which integrates sensors, cameras, radars, and communication networks to create a multi-layered surveillance architecture .

The Border Coordination Conferences, held at multiple levels between BSF and Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB), provide forums for addressing border incidents, coordinating patrols, and managing local issues. However, cooperation has been limited by mutual suspicions, differing threat perceptions, and the absence of agreement on fundamental issues such as the scale and nature of migration (Das, 2008). The India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement of 2015, which resolved long-standing border demarcation disputes and facilitated the exchange of enclaves, represented a significant diplomatic achievement.

3.3 Implementation Challenges

A fundamental challenge is the absence of reliable data on the scale and characteristics of illegal migration. Estimates of the number of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India vary wildly, ranging from a few million to over 20 million, reflecting the lack of systematic documentation and the politicization of the issue (Lia, 2015). Without accurate data, evidence-based policy formulation becomes impossible, and political rhetoric often substitutes for empirical analysis.

The identification and documentation of illegal migrants present formidable practical challenges. Many migrants have acquired fraudulent documents, including ration cards, voter identification, and even birth certificates, making detection nearly impossible without extensive investigation (Deb et al., 2017)

Deportation of identified illegal migrants has proven virtually impossible due to Bangladesh's refusal to accept deportees without conclusive proof of Bangladeshi nationality [89]. India lacks the diplomatic leverage or bilateral agreements necessary to compel Bangladesh's cooperation in repatriation. As a result, even when

individuals are identified as illegal migrants through legal proceedings, they cannot be deported and remain in India indefinitely .

Political factors have significantly complicated implementation. The issue has been heavily politicized, with different political parties adopting contradictory positions based on electoral calculations (Gillan,2002). Allegations that certain parties protect illegal migrants to cultivate vote banks have created political obstacles to effective enforcement.

4. Strategic Recommendations

4.1 Policy Interventions

First, India urgently needs to develop a comprehensive national immigration policy that clearly defines categories of migrants, establishes transparent procedures for legal migration, and creates mechanisms for managing different types of population movements. Such a policy should distinguish between refugees fleeing persecution, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and irregular migrants, providing appropriate legal frameworks for each category.

Second, the citizenship determination process must be reformed to ensure accuracy, transparency, and fairness while maintaining security objectives. Third, India should pursue bilateral and multilateral frameworks for migration management with Bangladesh and other South Asian neighbours. Such frameworks should include agreements on border management, information sharing, migrant repatriation, and addressing root causes of migration . The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could provide a platform for regional dialogue on migration, though bilateral India-Bangladesh engagement will remain central.

Fourth, addressing the root causes of migration requires engagement with economic disparities, environmental stresses, and governance challenges in both Bangladesh and India's border regions. Development initiatives that create livelihood opportunities in migration-source areas in Bangladesh and destination areas in India can reduce migration pressures.

4.2 Security Enhancements

Security enhancements must balance the imperative of border control with respect for human rights and the need to maintain positive bilateral relations. First, border infrastructure should be completed and upgraded, with particular attention to unfenced sectors and technological surveillance capabilities. Second, intelligence capabilities focused on migration-related security threats should be strengthened, with particular emphasis on identifying linkages between migration networks and insurgent or terrorist organizations. Third, targeted operations against insurgent infrastructure, combined with development initiatives that address local grievances, can reduce the security threats associated with migration.

5. Conclusion

Illegal Bangladeshi migration to India represents a complex, multifaceted security challenge that defies simple solutions. This analysis has demonstrated that the security dimensions of unauthorized migration extend far beyond border control to encompass internal security threats, demographic transformation, ethnic tensions, and regional stability implications. The issue is deeply embedded in historical legacies of partition, ongoing economic disparities, environmental stresses, and political contestation, requiring comprehensive responses that address both immediate security concerns and underlying structural factors.

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