



A Study on Illegal Immigration in North East India: Problems and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Migration is a global phenomenon. It is a relatively permanent movement of a person or group of population across a political boundary to a new residential area or community. Migration tends to create complex demographic patterns that profoundly impact the unity/integrity of the immigrating states. Legal/illegal migration or immigration in the North East India, it should be noted that (i) the region is bounded by five countries i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal; and (ii) The region is cut off from the rest of the country, being only connected to the 'bottle neck' a narrow strip of land just about 22km. long land corridor passing through Silliguri town. The region is surrounded by different foreign countries and is also the route of migration to the Assam Valley and the Manipur Valley from time immemorial. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the genesis of the immigration problem in this part (NER) of India. At the same time, it will also look into the various policies and programmes initiated by the Government of India, which help in proliferating the immigration crisis in the region. Finally, the paper will examine and suggest some possible remedies to diffuse the turmoil and menace of immigration, in particular from the NE States of India.

Key words: Bottleneck, Illegal Migration, Immigration, Integrity, and Legal,

Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon. It is a relatively permanent movement of a person or group of population across a political boundary to a new residential area or community. Human history has been marked by migration from densely populated areas to sparse regions, from regions of low resources to regions more plentifully endowed, from persecution and oppression to supposed freedom and peace. In the past, before the system of state had crystallized, whole ethnic communities or nations migrated (Adhikari, 2010), whereas today it is generally by individuals or families. There are two forms of migration, namely (a) internal migration -- movement of people from one part to another within a country for settlement; and (b) international migration -- international migration is again classified into two viz, (a) emigration—as people moving out of the country and (b) immigration as, people coming into the country.

Regarding illegal migration or immigration in the North East India – The region comprises of the seven sisters (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) and the Himalayan state of Sikkim, it should be noted that (i) the region is bounded by five countries i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal; and (ii) The region is cut off from the rest of the country, being only connected to the 'bottle neck' a narrow strip of land just about 22km. long land corridor passing through Silliguri town. So, being surrounded by foreign countries, and the region being a route of migration (Assam valley and Manipur valley) since time immemorial, the states of NE. India is highly prone to illegal migration, after India becomes independence. The unstoppable increasing immigration in the region has been creating a complex demographic pattern, which has a profound impact on the economic, socio-political, ethnic, and cultural relationship as well as unity and communal harmony in the region. There is no state in this region which does not affect by illegal migration. So, the immigration issue is the most menacing problem that North East India is facing today.

In light of the above-mentioned issues, the present paper is an attempt to analyse the genesis of the immigration problem in this part of India. At the same time, it will also look into the various policies and programmes initiated by the Government of India, which help in proliferating the immigration crisis in the region. Finally, the paper will examine and suggest some possible remedies to diffuse the turmoil and menace of immigration, in the future, from the North East States of India.

Genesis of the Impending issue of immigration in the North-Eastern Region:

The genesis of the present volatile immigration problem faced by this region can be traced to the coming of the British in this part of the world in 1826. When the British occupied Upper Assam, they found that the land was very sparsely populated. They also found that tea grew well there. By the end of the century, the British had spread tea gardens all over the foothills to the north and south of the Brahmaputra valley (Rammohan, 2007). In the beginning, the one major obstacle to creating a tea industry in Assam was the lack of an adequate local labour supply. The British first thought of solving their problem by importing Chinese coolies from Singapore. But it failed to materialise. At the same time, the indigenous population was not willing to work in the tea gardens. Then the British employers recruited indigent tribes from the hill areas of central India, Bengal, and southern Bihar—a region known as Chotta Nagpur as Assam tea gardens' labourers. By the turn of the century, there were 764 tea gardens in Assam employing 40,000 persons and producing 145 million pounds of tea per year. The number of migrants to the plantation increased between 1911 and 1921, when the tea industry imported 769,000 labourers. Another 422,000 came during the following decades (Weiner, 1988).

In the meantime, the British also found that the indigenous populations were not capable of growing surplus rice to feed the tea garden labour. In neighbouring East Bengal, the Bengali Muslim population was already running short of cultivable land. The British consciously encouraged the immigration of Bengali Muslims from the East Bengal District. They came in hordes and settled in Goalpara, Kamrup, and Nowgong District. By 1931, just thirty years after the migration had started, more than ten million Bengali Muslim peasants had settled in the above three districts. C.S. Mullen, then the Census Commissioner of Assam, recorded this. Later, the government of Sir Saadullah, again, encouraged the Bengali Muslims to settle by de-reserving grazing reserved for them. The third group of people that was to play a significant role in alienating the people of Assam was the Marwari's who the British brought to be their middleman, as Assam at that time had a barter economy. Within a short time of their arrival, the Marwari's have opened shop in all tea gardens, diversified into grain trade, and by the time of independence, they had established a complete grip on the trade and commerce of Assam. The last group that the British brought was the Bengali Hindus from East and West Bengal. They were brought to work as clerks in the tea gardens, and oil and coal industries, as well as to work in railway lines that had developed in upper Assam for exporting the commodities from Assam to the nearby port of Calcutta. Thus, by the time of independence, the Bengali Muslim peasant was grabbing the fertile land of the caste Hindus and the tribal, the Bengali babu was beating the Assamese babu in the job market. On the other hand, Marwari had taken firm control of the grain and essential supplies, textiles, and every other item of commerce. The alienation of the Assamese was already complete (Kumar, 2006), and it spread slowly in other parts of the northeast region (Weiner, 1988). Thus, the genesis of migration, which created future demographic changes and turmoil in the region, especially in Assam, was made by exploiting the tea plantation in Assam.

Another British policy which encouraged, in future, the present burning issue of illegal migration in North East India, was the Partition of Bengal in 1905. In 1905, Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal into East and West to weaken the nationalist movement in Bengal. West was a predominantly Bengali Hindu Province, and East was a predominantly Bengali Muslim Province. On the partition of Bengal, the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was formed by the amalgamation of Assam and Surma Valley with fifteen districts of the old Bengal Province. (Majumdar et.al., 1990). There followed bitter hostility from the Bengali Hindus, who resented the partition of their province, and from Assam, who resented incorporation into a portion of Muslim dominated East Bengal. In 1912, the British annulled the portion and re-established Assam as a separate Chief Commissioner's province that now included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar. These new boundaries were to remain intact until the partition of India of Assam in 1947. With the inclusion of the Sylhet district, Assam was demographically and politically balanced precariously between the Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims. There was a widespread fear among the Assamese that their land might be swamped by Migrants. Such fear was made more credible by the increasing influence of Bengali Muslim migrants into the State in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Weiner, 1988). Thus, the partition of Bengal, to some extent, had a lasting influence on the attitude of Assamese towards the migrants from the neighboring areas of East Bengal, and it also helped in escalating the future demographic turmoil in the region.

Post Independence - Proliferation of the immigration issue in North-East India:

The changing demographic profile of the region due to population influx was more in the post-colonial period, as evidenced by the growth of the Muslim population in Assam and other states of the region. Demographically, as compared to the rest of the country, the rate of population growth in the North East

Region has been higher in the decade following 1951. Major contributory factors have been immigration from areas outside the region, and influx from the neighbouring countries, especially from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). The continuous inflow of Bangladeshi migrants into the region has substantially changed the demographic pattern and socio-political and economic crises, as well as ethnic and communal strife in the region, as manifested by the recent communal violence in Bodo areas of Assam. Immigration into the North East, particularly in Assam and Tripura, assumed a tremendous proportion after independence (Rao, 1985). As a result of the partition of the Sylhet district, there was a heavy influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from the dimpled part of the Sylhet district. According to the census report of 1991, persons born in Pakistan and enumeration in Assam reached the enormous total of 800 thousand There was some emigration from Assam at the time of partition, of who opted for Pakistan. But their number was insignificant (Agrawal, 1987). Because the Muslims living in Assam opted for Assamese languages as their mother tongue in the 1950 census as a trick to avoid eviction from their lands (Biswas, 1994). The growth of the Muslim population resulted in their proportion rising steadily in Assam from 16.23 percent in 1911 to 30.91 percent in 2001. The illegal immigration of Muslims is estimated at several million, spread over the entire region. In the aftermath of partition in 1947 and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, there was mass infiltration into the region (Meitei & Singh, 2011). In the report submitted to the President of India in November 1998, then S.K. Sinha, the then Governor of Assam, wrote, "As a result of population movement from Bangladesh, the specter looms large of the indigenous people of Assam being reduced to a minority in their home state. Their cultural survival will be in jeopardy, their political control will be weakened, and their employment opportunities will be undermined. This silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of the geo-strategically vital district of Lower Assam (on the border of Bangladesh). The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time before demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made. The rapid growth of international Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force for this demand..... Loss of Lower Assam will sever the entire land mass of the North East from the rest of India, and rich natural resources of the region will be lost to the nation" (Kumar, 2006). Here, it should be noted that an unchecked large influx of illegal Bengali Muslims in the region, especially in Assam led to a strong movement for driving out foreigners and outsiders. The movement gathered momentum in 1979 during the preparation of electoral roll for holding the parliamentary by-election in Mongaldai constituency. After the inclusion of foreign nationals in the voter lists, the Election Commission declared that more than 45,000 foreign nationals were enlisted in the list. This verdict of the Election Commissioner stirred up a massive movement demanding the detection, deletion of foreigners from the voter list, and then the deportation of these people, and declaring till the completion of these three tasks, there should be no election in Assam. The chaotic situation in Assam came to an end after signing in famous Assam Accord on 15 August, 1985 (Dutta & Nikunjata, 1992). The recent riot in the Bodo-dominated areas like Kokrajahar is the socio-political, economic, and ethnic impact from illegal immigration and the role played by Baruddin Ajmal and his AIUDF. (Garg, 2012).

The situation in Tripura shows another manifestation of the illegal migration problem. At the time of independence, the state had 56 percent of the tribal population. However, the situation changed gradually. The local population has been turned into a minority community by cross-border migrants from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan up to 1971) (Meitei & Singh, 2011). According to the 2001 census, the tribal population is reduced to 31.05 percent. There is no doubt that the marginalization of the tribal population in Tripura is due to unchecked migration from Bangladesh. The situation in the state is deteriorating to such a stage that all political and administrative as well as economic power of the state has passed from the indigenous tribal population to migrant Bengalis. Thus, the tribes of Tripura have today been reduced to numerical non-entities and are engaged in armed conflict against the migrants whom they see as the usurpers of their homeland. With political and administrative power in the hands of the latter, the indigenous people are engaging in a losing battle for survival. So, indigenous tribes fear that as immigrants from Bangladesh have already put down new roots in Tripura, it is likely that the original inhabitants of Tripura would become rootless one day in their own land (Behera, 2011)

There is justification for such fear. The Chakma refugees also created problems in Tripura, which were recent migrants in the state due to disturbances in Bangladesh (Agrawal, 1987). The Chakma refugees stayed on in Tripura since 1986, with 60,000 of them having been given shelter in the South District (Behera, 2011). The huge hydroelectric project in Chittagong Hill Tracts, popularly known as Kaptai Dam (constructed in 1964), inundated 253 square miles, including 10 square miles of reserved forest. Nearly 54,000 acres of plough land, which was about 40 percent of the district's total cultivable area, was submerged under it. Homesteads of 18,000 families and approximately 100,000 people were displaced from their hearths and homes, of which 70 percent were Chakmas. The unfavorable policies of the Government of Bangladesh, one after one, forced these Chakmas to move from the Chittagong Hill Tract Region to neighbouring states of India. Thousands of these displaced people migrated into sparsely populated regions of Tripura, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. Perhaps 40,000 environmental-related refugees migrated to India, where today, they live in Arunachal Pradesh of India. (Kumar, 2009).

The influx of Chakma refugees and Hajongs from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh also led to ethnic disturbance in the states of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. While the Mizos opposed demands by Chakmas for a centrally governed territory, the issue of their permanent residence in India became an issue

in Arunachal Pradesh in the 1990s when the All-Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) raised it (Behera, 2011). Even as the anti-foreigner campaign picks up, the Chakmas have been particularly targeted as the major threat to the natives' political, economic, and social rights. The Chakmas, on the other hand, say, "We'll live and die here (Wangru, 1994). So, the AAPSU being fear from impending danger of influx by foreigner, has been serving 'quite notice' since August 1, 1994 to Chakmas, Tibetans, Bangladeshis Muslims, Nepalis and Yobins (Burmese origin). (North East Sun, 2001) The issue of Chakmas and others in Arunachal Pradesh has become political and remains unsolved despite the changes in the state government.

Illegal immigration has been taking place in Nagaland, especially in areas bordering Assam. Further, the cosmopolitan nature of Dimapur (there is no inner line permit in the Dimapur area) makes their identification and detection a highly arduous task, as they can be easily assimilated with the local population. Unlike other states of North East India, the socio-political, economic, and ethnic impact of illegal immigration in Nagaland is the emergence of a community called 'Sumias', who are the children of intermarriage between the Sumi Naga tribe and immigrants. Later, they also denote all the children born to any native girl marrying an immigrant. The children born of such intermarriage are named after their mothers' tribe name to get all the facilities enjoyed by the native Nagas. (Singh, 2009)

Manipur, being a cosmopolitan state, has been attracting a large number of immigrants. Many Myanmarese Muslims are entering Manipur after the Rakhine State communal riots in Myanmar recently. Jiri District of Manipur is also now swamped by Bangladeshi immigrants. Still, the trans-border migration of Kukis in the North, Eastern, and Southern parts of the state is an old-age phenomenon and a continuing process. Regarding the Kuki immigration in Manipur, it should be noted that since independence (after Manipur's merger into the Union of India on the 15th October 1949). The immigration of the Kuki-Chin-Zo into Manipur can be studied in four phases. The first phase of immigration was between the 1950s and the early 1960s, when there was a civil war in Burma (now known as Myanmar), after General Ne Win became the military ruler of Burma in 1962. During this period, there were numerous refugee camps from Burma were set up in various parts of Manipur, particularly in the present Churachandpur District. For the rehabilitation and financial help for the Kuki refugees from Burma, R. Suisa, the then Outer Manipur M.P. (1957-1962), sent a letter to the Finance Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (GOI). The GOI agreed to the requisition of R. Suisa to grant the Kukis relief fund or refugee fund under Memo No. 01/R/RFL. The GOI released the fund through three instalments, namely 1. First on 22/4/1957, 2. Second on 7/7/1959, 3. Third on 28/2/1966, Fourth payment 17/7/1968, and so on. Except for a few, it was found that the majority of the refugees did not go back to Burma. (Manipur Secretariat Files)

The second major phase of immigration Kuki – Zo community took place before and after the 8th August 1988 Uprising in Burma (now Myanmar). After the military crackdown on the protesters, there were widespread protests and demonstrations against the military government in Myanmar, and several displaced Chin-Kuki people sought refuge in neighbouring countries, specially to India and Bangladesh. Then, many refugee camps were set up in Manipur during this time. As per reports, most of the refugees did not go back to Myanmar. The then governments of the time (both the Central and State) did not take any concrete step to deport the large population.

The third phase of immigration was after the informal ceasefire between the Assam Rifles and the Kuki militant groups in 2005. After the informal SoO pact in 2005, Kuki militants stopped attacking the security forces, and the Assam Rifles halted their counter-insurgency operations against the Kuki militants. Here, it should be noted there is no actual armed revolt of the Kuki militants against either the Government of India or Manipur. In 2008, 25 Kuki militant groups under two apex militant groups- Kuki National Organisation and Zomi Revolutionary Organisation (ZRO) - entered a tripartite SoO pact which included the Government of Manipur. This tripartite SoO pact helped in immigration of Myanmarese Kuki-Zo community into Manipur.

The abnormal growth rate of the Kuki population in Manipur is also reflected by the abnormal increase of new villages in Kuki-dominated districts in Manipur, as evidenced by the Census of India 1961 to the Census of India 2011. During the last five decades, in Kangpokpi and Churachandpur Districts, where the most violent narco-terrorism is occurring, newly settled villages numbered 355 in Kangpokpi and 262 in Churachandpur. On the other hand, in the Naga-dominated Districts of Manipur, namely Tamenglong and Senapati, only 42 and 14 new villages have sprung up. There are strong shreds of evidence that immigrants from outside Manipur - internal and external, have massively settled in Kuki-dominated districts.

The present phase of Kuki immigration in Manipur takes place in post-2021 Myanmar Crisis. It was driven by the escalation of conflict and instability in Myanmar following the military coup. For safety and security of their livelihood, many Myanmarese specially of the Kuki -Zo community came to Manipur. It is a continuous process with a porous border and no proper border fencing between the two countries.

Meghalaya is also slowly having an immigration problem due to its proximity to Bangladesh, and there is increasing intermarriage between illegal migrants and native girls. So, to save from imminent calamities from illegal migration, there is a strong demand for the imposition of the Inner Line System in Meghalaya.

The problem of immigration in the region is further escalated due to the heavy influx of Nepalis under the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaties of 1950, 1951, and 1956. Due to similarity in physical condition, a heavy influx of Nepalis to the Darjeeling and Sikkim areas took place. In all eight States, the Nepali population is

concentrated in rural segments where they do cultivation and rearing of cattle, etc. (Meitei & Singh, 2011). However, unlike the migration from Bangladesh, the Nepali influx does not appear to have any decisive impact in the region.

The continued illegal immigration in the region causes ethnic tension among the states of the region is the byproduct of changing demographic patterns as the people are fighting for natural resources in the same limited geographical space. Besides, changes in ethnic composition in the case of Nagaland - the emergence of a new tribe, 'Sumias'. Displacement of indigenous people from their ancestral birthplace to other areas (Bodos and Adivasi in Assam, Meiteis in Manipur), etc., will lead to a snowball effect on the already agitated socio-political fabric of the region.

Suggestions:

In order to prevent heavy illegal influx in the North East, the following may be considered for future action:

1. The threat posed by the illegal migrants to the country's socio-cultural, political, and tranquility and development requires a multi-pronged strategy. The problem of illegal migration needs to be addressed by formulating an effective strategy jointly by the Central and State governments.
2. There should be a uniform immigration law of the country, namely the Foreigners ACT of 1946. The application of the Citizens' Amendment Act 2019 in North East India should not be applied in toto without protecting the interests of the North East people.
3. A separate department of Border management needs to be established and made responsible for border management. Effective border management requires proper fencing, effective utilization of border guarding and control by immigration check posts to check illegal migration to this region, as the region is very porous.
4. The Central Government must continue to respond diplomatically to the problems faced by religious minorities in Bangladesh and to protect their interest; and at the same time, India should help in the economic development of Bangladesh to provide more employment opportunities to the Bangladeshis.
5. The identification of the alien should be based on the National Registration of Citizens (NRC). There is a genuine need for coordination and collective action among the constituent states of the region in identifying, detecting, and deporting illegal migrants from one state to another.
6. Although migrant Nepalis are not viewed as security risks, the rise of an organization like Akhil Bharat Nepali Ekta Samaj (ABNES) indicates that migrant Nepalis are being communalized. The organizational strength of migrant Nepalis should not be ignored on the emotional ground, as this could one day assume a serious snowball effect and pose a security threat to India. At the same time, in the context of the growing Maoist threat to India and its spread to North East states, and their cross-border linkage, the migrant Nepalis need to be securitized. The pattern and nature of Nepali migration to India need to be monitored and regulated.
7. Last but not the list is the overall survey and evaluation of all the natural resources of the region, and its distribution should be done and properly utilised for the benefit of the people of the region
8. There should be a constitutional protection of the land and political rights of the indigenous and original inhabitants of North East, in the areas threatened by the illegal influx, to prevent them from becoming another Tripura in the region.

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